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**ANTHOLOGIES OF CONTEMPORARY  
POLISH POETRY IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION:  
PARATEXTS, NARRATIVES,  
AND THE MANIPULATION OF NATIONAL LITERATURES**

by

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## DECLARATION

Some of the content of this dissertation has been published during the course of research. The papers listed below are included in the dissertation in partial and modified form.

Section	Citation	Publication Status
Introduction	Piasecki, Bohdan. "Beyond the Political." <u>Cambridge Quarterly</u> 39.2 (2010):195.	Published.
Chapter 1	Piasecki, Bohdan. "Translating Literatures: An Attempt to Establish a Methodology for the Analysis of Anthologies of Translated Poetry." Christina Marinetti & Susan Bassnett, eds. <u>Crossing the Disciplines: Explorations at the Interface</u> . Coventry: Centre for Translation and Comparative Cultural Studies, Warwick Working Papers 2008. 9-21	Published.

I certify that all material in this dissertation which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other university.

## **SUMMARY**



## INTRODUCTION

### 1. MULTIPLE DECONTEXTUALISATION, OR WHY STUDY TRANSLATION ANTHOLOGIES

Some of these anthologies are frankly superior to the real works they are extracted from - with often justified disregard for the unity of the works they dismember.

(Genette, The Aesthetic Relation 100)

One of the ways in which monolingual anthologies of poetry are frequently criticised is that they tend to remove a text, or a number of texts, from their natural environment, which is the body of work of an author (see Korte, Schneider and Lethbridge 347). The selected poem is removed from the company of the others in its author's collection, and surrounded by other texts. Its context changes, all the more so because it is frequently accompanied by extratextual information such as biographical and/or critical notes; and the reading of the poem is heavily influenced by the general tone of the anthology itself. As publishing director at Penguin Tony Lacey put it, "[one] argument against anthologies (...) is the wrenching of the poems out of context (...) The new context may be a bizarre or inappropriate one; or, if the editor is any good, it can be a fresh, interesting context" (333). It can be argued that inclusion in an anthology can give the poem a new life, but the same process makes it easier to manipulate the text, as so many

of its features can be altered by the makers of the anthology in ways both subtle and explicit – from the historical context, through the text’s aesthetic categorisations, to its very words.

While all of the above applies to any poetry anthology, the phenomenon is even more conspicuous in the case of anthologies of translated verse, where original poems are subjected to a triple decontextualisation. First, just as in monolingual anthologies, they are removed from the body of work of the author; second, they are removed from their original culture; and third, they are removed from their very language. A space is thus created for countless potential changes, both intentional and accidental, in the text’s significance, literary value, and status, as perceived by the anthology’s readers.

These alterations can determine a poet’s status in the target culture, as they are likely to reach considerable numbers of readers: anthologies are also eminently marketable. “All publishers,” Lacey states, “know that single volumes of poetry by individual poets are among the hardest books of all to sell. (...) Yet anthologies can sell, and do so in big numbers” (335). The reasons for the popularity of anthologies are manifold: they provide great starting points for new readers, who could otherwise be daunted by the selection of volumes on the shelves in bookstores; they cater to the needs of those interested in specific periods, cultures, or themes, rather than individual authors; and, last but by no means least, they tend to be used as handbooks in educational institutions.

Because they represent a relatively safe investment in publishers’ eyes, anthologies constitute the vehicle of choice for foreign poetry. Indeed, in the case

of translated texts from peripheral cultures and languages, anthologies frequently become the only way for poets to reach readers. Granted, there are also literary journals, but these tend to be targeted at very specialized audiences – and are, as has been argued by Eva Hung, nothing more than types of anthologies themselves (cf. Hung 239-250). In other words, this means the books readers most likely to reach for are precisely those which, as we have established earlier, provide the greatest opportunity for manipulation through the decontextualisation of the collected texts: “most readers – ‘common’ & academic ones – know poetry from anthologies, which provide the most comfortable and affordable access to poetry.” (Korte 7)

I have mentioned that anthologies are frequently used as school texts. Many are, in fact, collated with a target audience of students in mind. Even those ~~who~~ which are not intended to be used in schools or at universities are commonly expected to have been compiled by experts in the field, people carefully selected by publishers for their knowledge of the period, area or topic that the anthology covers. This combination of educational connotations and an aura of expertise ensures their standing as definite, objective, and authoritative sources. An anthology’s accuracy and representativeness is rarely questioned by its readers. Indeed, as Karen Kilcup wrote, “composing an anthology creates a miniature canon, no matter how resistant the editor is to vexed notions of goodness and importance” (37).

By strengthening a canon, deconstructing it, or constructing a brand new one, anthologies can address stereotypical perceptions of their source culture –

that is, strengthen a certain view of the culture or attempt to promote a new image. Again, this is especially visible in the case of anthologies of translations, where the scarcity of material available for comparison frequently forces readers unfamiliar with the source language and culture to rely on the selection and presentation chosen by the anthology's compilers – and to accept the narrative that they create or support. In an article calling for a more in-depth study of translation anthologies, Ton Naaijken observes that “the role played by the anthology in the canonising process is underestimated. (After all, many poets are only known for their poems in anthologies, often the sole reason even to include them in a subsequent anthology)” (516).

Anthologies are thus among the biggest sellers in the poetry world, and that includes anthologies of translated poetry. Their authoritative status, close to that of course-books (and the fact that many of them are used as teaching aids) lends them an impressive potential for catapulting texts straight into the canon. They rely on translation, but rarely draw attention to the fact that they are collections of rewritings, thus leaving ample room for manipulation. And yet – there are very few studies that encompass the phenomenon of translation anthologies in all its complexities<sup>1</sup>. However, I will try to steer clear of beaten paths, and refrain from creating yet another typology of anthologies (as many have been produced already, by Helga Essman, Ton Naaijken, and others<sup>2</sup>). Instead, I will focus on the many channels through which anthologies mediate the texts they contain, and show how they both reflect and influence the dual contexts of their source and target cultures.

## **2. A BLESSING AND A CURSE: POLISH POETRY IN THE LAST 30 YEARS**

In Poland, literature is politics by other means.

(Tighe, dust jacket)

There were twelve anthologies of contemporary Polish poetry published between 1980 and 2009. In those three decades, the country saw a declaration of martial law, the threat of Soviet invasion, a peaceful revolution, and the explosive growth of a capitalist economy. At the beginning of the period, Polish poetry enjoyed a special position amongst anglophone readers, largely due to the country's troubled history. Ravaged by the Second World War, suffering under a totalitarian communist government, hidden behind an impenetrable Iron Curtain, Poland paradoxically appeared to many as a poet's paradise: unlike the West, it was a place where literature still mattered. However, while no-one could question the bravery of Polish writers standing their ground in the face of censorship and oppression, their courage alone was hardly reason enough to accept their literary excellence.

The particular position enjoyed by Polish literature under a communist government was much more complex than that of a rousing political pamphlet. Most Poles, thirsty as they were for independent political discourse, refused to treat poetry solely as an outlet for rebellion against the powers that be. As literary

historian Jarosław Anders, who lived through that period in Poland, writes of his generation: “We quickly learned to reject this reductive, essentially Marxist approach to literature. We sensed quickly that the poetry of Zbigniew Herbert, Wisława Szymborska, and, of course, Czesław Miłosz was really about metaphysics and transcendence, not about politics and ideology” (Dreams of Fires viii). The poets all lived through this period of suffering and daily oppression; they endured censorship and saw their very language twisted and appropriated by the state’s propaganda machine. And yet, their shared experiences have resulted in contrasting styles and philosophies, in different poetries.

Until 1989, Poland seemed like an answer to Shelley’s “Defence of Poetry”, a dystopian country where poets were very much acknowledged legislators, and could, if they wanted, assume the mantle of national bards dispensing moral and ethical guidance. The change of regime made the censors disappear, and left the nation to enjoy its young democracy and the pleasures of a free market, leaving some poets relieved of the burden of witness and others scrambling to find a new identity for themselves. Today, Poland is part of the European Union, and its literature is as easily accessible as any other; however, it seems that as it lost its dissident status, its attraction to western readers has weakened, judging by the rarity of new books and the dwindling print runs. Indeed, it appears that the political dimension had become, in the perception of readers, the main – or only – attraction of Polish writing; with this aspect gone, there seemed to be no more reasons to read it.

Polish poetry's journey over the last three decades was well documented in translation anthologies, and as such is eminently suited for my purposes: an excellent example of change both in socio-cultural context and in poetics. My aim in this study is to ascertain how those transformations were reflected by anthologists, and how the poetry's perception changed when filtered through the lenses of translation, editing, and publication.

### **3. APPROACHING THE SUBJECT**

Anthologies are more than a referendum. They determine not simply who gets published or what gets read, but who reads, and how.

(Price 3)

In Chapter 1, I will outline a methodology for the study of anthologies of poetry in translation. Building on the findings of pioneering researchers such as Armin Frank, Helga Essman and Ton Naaijken, my aim is to create a comprehensive list of potentially significant elements specific to anthologies, which can then be used to uncover the anthologists' agendas and measure extent to which the books influence the interpretation of the texts they collect. In addition, I will draw from the fields of translation studies and book studies to prove the crucial importance of elements external to the books themselves, such as historical

context and operative public narratives, in the wider understanding of the translation process.

Chapters 2 and 3 will both be devoted to outlining the historical context, with an emphasis on the contrasts between the internal Polish understanding of the country's poetry and the views and opinions published in English both in the United States and in Great Britain. Thus, in Chapter 2, I intend to employ Polish sources exclusively, in order to convey the perspective of the source culture faithfully. Chapter 3 covers the same period, but makes use of both academic and popular publications to establish how Polish poetry was received among specialist and casual readers. Both of these studies are, as far as I could ascertain, unique, both within translation studies and Slavic studies.

Finally, Chapter 4 will feature an analysis of the anthologies themselves, with my focus firmly on the correlations between the findings from Chapters 2 and 3 and the ways in which the books present and advertise the poetry they contain. While some of the twelve volumes under scrutiny have been reviewed in academic journal, a comparative study of this magnitude has never been undertaken, and there have been very few critical texts whose objects were the anthologies themselves, rather than individual poems and translations.

I hope this innovative study can describe and analyse a complex process of literary transfer, a macro-scale translation where the source material is a national poetry rather than a text.



## **CHAPTER 1: METHODOLOGY**

It is important, at the start, to formulate one caveat. While there exist several established methodologies for the analysis of translated poetry, none of them is appropriate for my research: as I indicated earlier, I will not be focusing on the poems themselves, opting instead to treat each anthology as the basic object of study.

This chapter will take as its starting point Gérard Genette's notion of paratext, and explore, in three separate sections, its vital importance in the specific case of translation anthologies, its various relevant iterations and their respective interpretive consequences, and ways in which extrinsic factors can be included within a book's paratext and affect its tone, reception, and contents.

### **1. THE CENTRAL ROLE OF PARATEXT IN TRANSLATION ANTHOLOGIES**

Genette has defined "paratext" as a collective term for all the textual devices which mediate a text to a reader, further subdivided into peritext, included in the book, and epitext, separate from its physical edition (and comprising interviews, reviews, etc.) While I will use the notions of paratext and its subcategories in accordance with his definitions, certain amendments need to be made to his assessment of their function to suit the specifics of translation anthologies. I would contend that their paratext plays a far more crucial role than Genette is willing to concede to that of single author, untranslated books: as he

introduces the concept of paratext, Genette unhesitatingly categorises paratextual information as secondary writing, meant to appeal to readers before they buy a book and to subsequently provide reading directions, but ultimately without any real power to alter the text in a substantial way:

... except for limited exceptions that we will meet here and there, the paratext, in all its forms, is a fundamentally heteronomous, auxiliary discourse devoted to the service of something else which constitutes its right of existence, namely the text. No matter what aesthetic or ideological pretensions ("fine title," preface-manifesto), no matter what coquetry, no matter what paradoxical inversion the author puts into it, a paratextual element is always subordinate to "its" text. (Genette, "Introduction to the Paratext" 269)

Anthologies of translations, as a category, can be said to constitute one of the exceptions mentioned in the first sentence of the above extract. The increased number of mediators, the resulting authorial status of editors, and the foreignness of the source material all move the paratextual elements to the forefront.

The multiple degrees of removal between the published text and its original version, as described in the introduction to this dissertation, constitute one of the arguments for the pivotal importance of paratext in translation anthologies. Indeed, Harald Kittel, editor of a collection of essays entitled International Anthologies of Literature in Translation, stipulates in his introduction that "it would be a mistake to assume that anthologies translated from one or several source languages are a mere subclass of anthologies of untranslated literature ...

Simply by being included in such anthologies, translated texts are even further - if indirectly - transformed and modified" (xv).

Commenting on Genette's writings in his monograph on the manufacture of literary identity, Richard Watts sheds more light on the reasons for this unique transformative function of translation anthologies. He observes that no book can be treated as a faithful representation of the "unmediated, singular, and authoritative" authorial point of view, arguing that such an opinion fails to take the importance of paratext into account altogether. For all books, the material surrounding the core text operates in a space between the authorial voice and the reader's perception, and in most cases, it reaches the latter before the core text. Because it mediates the text, it also conditions and modifies the reader's response pre-emptively; a celebrity endorsement on the dust jacket, to take a very simple example, can evoke a whole range of responses connected to the public image and status of the celebrity in question. If this is true of monolingual, intracultural books, then translation anthologies, which add to the act of publishing the twin interventions of selection and translation, can be said to offer even greater opportunity for manipulation (see Watts 20-21).

Adopting a post-colonial approach, Watts goes one step further, noting that in the case of translated texts, the paratext's ability to elucidate and direct as described by Genette is amplified, and becomes the channel through which intercultural transfer occurs – it is, in effect, the agent that makes it possible for a complete translation process to occur, and thus constitutes an indispensable and integral part of the text itself from the point of view of the target culture reader.

It is possible to understand the paratext as an instrument of cultural translation and, in the case of subsequent editions, retranslation. For Genette, the primary function of paratexts in all contexts is to attract readers, to draw them toward and into the book, and on this point there can be no disagreement. Genette presents the secondary (postacquisition) function of the paratext as being one of explanation and guidance.

However, with works by a perceived cultural Other, the secondary function of the paratext can more precisely be understood as one of intralingual cultural translation. ... The paratext translates through its abbreviated textual forms (prefaces, dedications, jacket copy, etc.) as well as iconic forms (cover art, illustrations). This gives readers who might not otherwise be immediately able to "read" the text's cultural difference access to it (19).

In other words, paratext inscribes the foreign core text into a familiar, domestic frame of reference, or creates an entirely new one referencing an acceptable and recognisable paradigm.

In the case of translation anthologies, it is therefore useful to study epi- and peritextual elements of a publication as intrinsic to the book's textual make-up. In her article advocating this very procedure, Rachel Malik argues that the mere act of publishing an edition of a book, combined with the various decisions and practices which accompany this act, fulfils a function which the text itself is powerless to do. She calls for "a more expanded sense about publishing and reading, and in particular how publishing practices propose reading practices,

which may cohere and/or conflict" (719), and dismisses Genette's clear distinction between the primordial core text and subordinate paratext as a fallacy.

Despite a richly nuanced account of the pragmatic function of everything from titles, the author's name, and prefaces to formats, series, epigraphs, and notes, Genette makes a fundamentally erroneous distinction between text and paratext. While the paratexts of an edition operate as explicit reading contexts that orient and adapt the text for different readerships, the text itself is "dumb" (literally, completely mute: "tout à fait muette") as to the matter of its own reading, creating an ideal separation between text and the market/history: the paratext is not only threshold but boundary.

(712)

The paratext thus becomes fundamental to the text and gains the authority to modify it by enforcing a particular reading or a specific interpretation.

If this feature is particularly salient in anthologies of translations, it is also due to the highly authoritative position the books' creators (editors, publishers, and translators alike) assume almost by default. In essence, the original texts' function becomes that of raw material, out of which a new compound text is created; as they originate from the creators themselves, this imbues peritextual pronouncements with a power normally only wielded by the authorial voice. When presented with foreign texts, collected in a strongly canonising format, frequently associated with academic learning, the average non-specialist reader unfamiliar with the source language and culture is likely to make the assumption

that its architects have expert knowledge of the source, and their judgment should not be questioned<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, those who produce the books will inevitably make use of their power to further their agendas, be they aesthetic or political. Literary scholar Cat Yampbell writes: “A common assumption is that the inner text is the kernel of value and significance while the rest is merely a protective husk. In the world of publishing, the paratext is not only equally significant, but many industry people argue that the cover is the foremost aspect of the book” (348).

I believe this proves the importance of paratext in the study of translation anthologies, and establishes its analysis as a valid line of enquiry. In the remaining two sections of this chapter, I will outline the two types of paratext that invite scrutiny: the book’s peritext, and the surrounding epitextual and factual materials. For each of them, I will outline which elements can prove meaningful for an anthology of translated poetry, and thus establish a methodology which I will follow in the subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

## **2. PERITEXT: SHAPING AN ANTHOLOGY’S IMPACT**

I will begin by delineating the key peritextual aspects specific to translation anthologies to be studied in order to perform a thorough analysis. I have identified four broad fields of enquiry: the people involved in the creation of the anthology, the texts (in the broadest sense of the word), the translations, and the reception reserved to the anthology in the target culture. Their actual relevance will inevitably vary from book to book, so rather than an obligatory checklist, I intend to employ them as indicators of potential sources of information about the

books. The types of questions to ask when investigating paratext have been clearly enumerated by Genette.

As for the particular study of each of these elements, or rather of these types of elements, it will obey the consideration of a certain number of features whose examination permits one to define the status of a paratextual message, whatever it may be. These features essentially describe its spatial, temporal, substantial, pragmatic, and functional characteristics. To put this in a more concrete way: defining an element of the paratext consists in determining its position (the question where?), its date of appearance, and eventually of disappearance (when?), its mode of existence, verbal or other (how?), the characteristics of its communicating instance, addresser and addressee (from whom? to whom?), and the functions which give purpose to its message (what is it good for?) (Genette, “Introduction to the Paratext” 263).

In the section below, however, I will try to investigate the four areas I have identified, and develop Genette’s very general set of enquiries into a set of analytical instruments for the study of anthologies of translated poetry.

## **2.1 Makers of Anthologies**

As stated, four roles need to be filled when an anthology of translations is being prepared: the contribution of authors, translators, editors, and publishers is necessary. While I discuss each of them separately in this chapter, there are many instances where they overlap, i.e. one person combines two or more roles. Having

a single individual perform more than one function concentrates power in their hands, and makes it much more likely for the anthology to become a conduit for their personal aesthetic and ideological preferences. To give a brief example before delving into the specifics of each role, let me quote Frank's remark on the consequences of one overtaking the others: "An editor's anthology resembles an art exhibition, presenting as it does a configured selection from the total reservoir of pertinent texts in a language, whether translated or not, whereas a translator's anthology is both an exhibition and a vehicle of transfer: it enlarges the store of extant translations, whether premier or repeat performances." (14)

### **2.1.1 Authors**

It is telling that Frank failed to mention an "authors' anthology" in the fragment quoted above. Those who write the texts that make up an anthology tend to have very little say about what particular part of their oeuvre is selected for publication and how it is presented. Interviews I have conducted with editors and poets show that while anthologists occasionally ask authors for permission (and even that, not always), they hardly ever turn to them for suggestions (and tend to disregard those that are offered despite not having been requested). This lack of real opportunity to influence how one's work is represented is especially frustrating since "...even where an anthology is not intended to provide 'representative' selections, the poems included tend to be read 'synecdochally', i.e. as representing the whole of a poet's work." (Korte 12) In other words, authors find themselves in the highly uncomfortable position of having someone else decide how their body of work will be perceived by a large group of people,



potentially numbering many more members than the poet's usual readership. This, understandably, leads authors to distrust anthologies. Lacey remarks, "I have been struck frequently over the years by the degree of hostility shown towards [anthologies] by poets themselves ... In my experience, the poet almost always disagrees with the choice of his poems that the editor has made." (334)

### **2.1.2 Translators**

The second role with the power to affect the contents of an anthology of translations is that of the translator. Declaring that translating a literary text can result in dramatic changes in its style, content, and artistic value would be stating the obvious; much has been written on the subject, and translations collected in anthologies are no exception to the general rules. I will deal with those aspects of translation analysis that are especially pertinent to the study of anthologies later in the chapter; in this section, I would like to focus on the translator as a person, and the impact which he or she might have on a collection of verse.

The first issue concerns the translators' culture. Do they hail from the source or the target culture? In other words – are they broadcasting or appropriating the poems? Establishing this can shed light on the origins of the impulse to rewrite their chosen text; as Frank rightly points out, "the motives and criteria for anthologizing one's own literature usually differ from those for anthologizing a foreign literature, whether in translation or not." (14) A source culture translator may suggest, for instance, a desire to broadcast the achievements of a home poet to a wider audience or an attempt to preserve and advertise a culture, while a target culture translator could suggest an underlying interest in the

source culture, or perhaps a need to learn from the voice of foreign writers<sup>4</sup>. While the above are hypothetical examples, it is an undisputable fact that most translators, whichever culture they hail from, are highly likely to follow their own agendas, be they aesthetic, political, or both. A good illustration would be Peter Dale Scott, who worked with Czesław Miłosz on the first volume of Zbigniew Herbert's poetry in English, and whose translations subsequently appeared in the famous Postwar Polish Poetry, edited by the Nobel Prize winner. When asked about his reasons for translating Herbert's poetry, Scott mentioned his desire to improve his own ability to write politically engaged poetry, and his focus on that aspect of Herbert's work was noticeable in his English renditions of the Polish poems (Scott).

The second important aspect of the translator's persona is the status he or she enjoys in the target culture. This includes both the general standing of translators as a social group and the individual reputation of the specific translator working on the anthology. In the first case, as David Limon notes, "experience suggests that there is a link between translation strategy and status – the higher the assigned status within a particular socio-cultural context, the more probable it is that the translator will have the confidence to mediate or intervene in the translation process" (33). When it comes to the second dimension, the patronage of a high-profile translator can have an important influence on the canonising power of the book – and, on occasion, also on its sales<sup>5</sup>.

### 2.1.3 Editors

Similar criteria apply to editors – their culture of origin and their status are important for determining patronage, while also affecting the power and influence of an anthology as well as its sales. While translators occasionally simply engage in commissioned work, editors are often the ones who suggest compiling an anthology in the first place. They are the ones who decide a certain book should appear on the market, pitching the idea to publishers – the reverse process is a rarity. Their decision shapes the purpose of the book at every level to match their vision: in the words of Rod Mengham, co-editor of Altered State: “there is always an agenda, no matter how hidden” (Mengham).

While translators of poetry often choose the texts they want to work on themselves, editors are responsible for the ultimate selection of poems and thus for establishing the selection criteria. Although those are frequently explicitly listed in the peritext, it is important to note that there are almost always criteria beyond those explicitly stated in forewords and introductions: an editor may claim to strive for representativeness within a given period of time, but additional filters such as personal taste or the elusive notion of translatability usually come into play as well. In fact, the frequent contrast between advertised and actual standards and policies used when selecting texts makes for a fascinating source of insight into the book’s intended purpose and its real function.

The importance of this particular aspect of the anthologising process cannot be overstated. I have already established that the very act of selection effectively creates a canon, and validates the source culture in the process. As Tim

Killick writes, "To select and to collect also implies that a literary genre has reached a certain level of success and that enough examples exist to necessitate editorial decisions of inclusion and exclusion" (161).

Editors also decide on the categorisation and ordering of texts, write introductions which set the tone for the whole book, and provide (or opt not to provide) biographical notes, cover blurbs, a glossaries, explanatory footnotes, etc. Editors' ideas are reflected in the book's constitution, and in all the paratextual devices that mediate a book to its readers. Editorial annotations, as we have already established, speak with an authoritative and frequently impersonal voice, encouraging certain perceptions of a text and striving to evoke in readers reactions that match the editor's reading of poems. Paratext can thus be read as an expression of their attitude to the source material, an attitude which they are likely to communicate to readers. Watts, for example, distinguishes between "adaptive" paratext, similar to adaptive translation in that it aims to domesticate the texts it mediates, and "literal" paratext, which preserves the text's "right to opacity" (Glissant, qtd in Watts, 20) The former indicates a colonial approach, with a dominant culture absorbing a text from another, while the latter signals a post-colonial relationship between the cultures involved in the translation process.

Whereas the adaptive mode of translation that I associate with the paratext from the colonial period is ethnocentric, hypertextual, and Platonic, the postcolonial paratext is closer to Berman's politically and philosophically nuanced understanding of literal translation, which is "ethical" (it accepts the cultural difference of the source

text), "poetic" (it does not attempt to simply rewrite the form of the source text), and "reflexive" (it signifies through form as well as through content). (Watts 77)

Differentiating between the two approaches by a close reading of paratextual data present in an anthology of translated poetry can thus provide valuable information on the relationship between the cultures involved as perceived by the book's creators.

#### **2.1.4 Publishers**

The choice of publisher (or, more frequently, the choice by a publisher to print a certain book) is perhaps the most underestimated factor in assessing the impact of a book of translations. As André Lefevere noted, publishers determine the length of the book:

publishers invest in anthologies, and publishers decide the number of pages they want to invest in. The 'limitations of size' or 'space' ritually lamented in almost all introductions to all anthologies are not a natural given. Rather, they reflect the anticipated demands of the marketplace. (124)

Publishers are also responsible for a book's tone: such elements of the paratext as cover design, format, layout, paper and print quality, and other aspects of the book's presentation are all their domain, and while these aspects tend to be ignored in analyses, they are certainly not without their role in establishing a reader's perception of the book and the culture it represents (Korte 1-32). In addition, the elements of book design listed above are part of another broad area:

marketing, which is also, of course, under the control of the publisher. Channels of distribution and expenses on promotion can occasionally determine a book's fate to a far greater extent than the quality of the poetry it contains; concerns over marketability can have a direct impact on an anthology's contents.

Publishers also have some bearing on an anthology's content, and this, too, is often forgotten or omitted, or attributed to editors' decisions. To matters similar to those burdening editors, such as aesthetic and political programmes, publishers add apprehensions related to marketability, cost and copyright. Some works can simply prove too expensive to include in what readers will then perceive as a representative anthology. Hence Frank's caveat:

The analysis should also, wherever possible, be supplemented by an enquiry into the circumstances of the making of the anthology, since exclusions, for instance, sometimes testify not so much to the anthologist's values or perceptions or to a translator-anthologist's skills, but to conditions of copyright, available funds, interference from the publisher, or political censorship. (14)

And indeed, factors such as cost and projected returns will also determine the number of copies printed.

Finally, it should be noted that the people who will read the book will be recruited from among the publisher's usual readership; small, specialist or local presses will reach different audiences than big, prestigious ones, not just in terms of numbers. The prestige of the publisher cannot be ignored, either: "Having the most potent publishing brand means that those charming and seductive four words

‘The Penguin Book of ... “are dangerous too. They imply immense authority and status.” (Lacey 336).

## **2.2 Textual Information**

I have already mentioned peritexts and their importance a number of times. They can contain explicit statements of intended function and listings of selection criteria, information on historical and cultural context, literary criticism, reasons for publication, and, if they focus on a subject already treated in previous volumes, their relation to other collections.

Peritext of all kinds is strongly authoritative, and the general reader perceives it as “by tradition unsigned, impartial, more or less objective, disinterested discourse” (Leitch 178). This makes it, at least potentially, a perfect tool for manipulation; however, it can also be aimed at other groups of readers, and identifying to whom the authors of the peritext are speaking can shed light both on their intentions and on the relations between the source and target cultures.

The addressee may be roughly defined as the “public,” but this definition is much too loose, for the public of a book stretches virtually to the whole of humanity, and there is need for some qualifications. Certain elements of the paratext are effectively addressed to (which does not mean that they reach) the public in general, that is to say anybody at all: this is so in the case (I will come back to this) of a title, or of an interview. Others are

addressed (with the same reservation) more specifically, and more restrictively, to the readers of the text alone: this is typically the case of the preface. Others, like earlier forms of the cover note, are addressed to critics alone; others, to booksellers; all this constituting (whether peritext or epitext) what we will call the public paratext. (Genette, “Introduction to the Paratext” 267)

It should also be noted here that an anthology’s canonising potential can be further increased by inviting famous authors or scholars to provide introductions<sup>6</sup>. Introductions and prefaces can range from simple, short notes offering a brief historical or cultural overview of the source material to long, heavily politicized manifestoes – a fascinating example is the anthology entitled Dreams of Fires: 100 Polish Poems 1970-1989 (Joachimiak, Malcolm and Scott) which mentions murder, tanks, invasion, police violence, economic chaos and a militant Catholic church in its introduction (and on the dust jacket) only to present readers with the introspective, restrained, frugal poems of the poets associated with the New Privacy movement.

But peritext can be telling even before one reads it. The mere presence of additional elements other than the standard introduction (i.e. biographical notes, glossaries, footnotes and annotations, etc.) betrays the intentions of the anthologist (and influences the reading of the texts) through identifying the book’s target group or the anthologist’s intentions. Cees Koster, for example, makes use of the contrasting annotation strategies in several anthologies of translated poems to differentiate the various roles each of the books is meant to play within its target



culture, with "extensive annotations and introductory essays" signifying "panoramic, representative anthologies," and sparse explanatory paratext indicating books of narrower scope, often designed to promote a certain aesthetic preference or critical viewpoint (see Koster 148-149).

The presence of a glossary and extensive explanatory notes can also suggest an intended audience of students, or at least an educative ambition on the side of the editor. As Malik notes:

student editions, with their ever-burgeoning paratextual apparatus, can include introductions, endnotes, chronologies of the author's life and times, facsimile title pages, extracts of classic criticism, and chapter summaries, and are constituted by two fundamentally contradictory sets of editing practices. The first asserts and constitutes the classic as a text whose meanings and values are universally intelligible; the second figures the classic text as opaque, but worthy or deserving of translation. (718-719)

Malik's point is taken further by Frank, who sees extensive annotation as a sign of mistrust from the target culture: "the monstrous paratextual prosthesis of the colonial years, in which nearly every text appeared with an explanatory, compensatory preface, suggests that the textual body is deemed incomplete by the publisher, that it is lacking in integrity"(20).

Titles are also often telling, as in most cases they hint at an anthology's purpose: the set of books I have studied for this dissertation contains several fitting examples of overt political marketing and catering to needs fuelled by news

stories, such as the collection entitled Witness Out of Silence: Polish Poets Fighting for Freedom, published in 1981, when Solidarność, Lech Wałęsa and martial law were making headlines in the west. Perhaps the most frequently repeated manoeuvre is to select a title that suggests both representativeness and innovation; examples such as Altered State: The New Polish Poetry or Young Poets of a New Poland abound). To conclude in Barbara Korte's words:

In many cases a preface or introduction is the only source from which one can derive information about the anthologist's intentions and intended audience, his or her prime criteria of selection, or – unfortunately very rarely – what difficulties he or she encountered in obtaining permissions and other problems of that kind. (20)

### **2.3 Structures**

Another important type of peritext in an anthology is the arrangement of the texts it contains. Be it chronological, thematic, alphabetic, aesthetic, or hierarchic, each arrangement has its impact with tangible consequences for the impact of the book as a whole. A seemingly innocuous alphabetic ordering (as opposed to a more traditional chronological structure) can further weaken the connection of the poems to their source culture by depriving them of their historical context. Omitting the source text and only printing the translations strengthens the illusion of reading an original, and makes it impossible even for the small percentage of bilingual readers to refer to the source language version. A more subtle tactic is to place the work of a particular poet at the beginning of an

anthology to inform the rest of the book. Some editors go to great lengths to make the sequence of texts in their anthology comply with their vision:

In some cases, however, the arrangement is not obvious and one has to read the whole anthology to make sense of the text arrangement. This is the case, for instance, with Fritz Adolf Hünitch's *Buch der Liebe* (1946), in which the arrangement of the anthologized texts reflects the development of love from its first beginnings to the loss of a loved one." (Essmann 156, 157)

Structural features can also be meaningful without necessarily being conscious decisions of the editors, reflecting instead trends and mindsets prevalent in the source culture (or the part of the culture the editor belongs to) at the time of the book's compilation. An obvious example is the representation of particular poets, of movements, of genders and ethnic minorities as shown through the number of poems included in the collection. For example, when asked why he decided to include so few texts written by women in *Altered State*, Tadeusz Pióro answered that there were simply few good women poets in the age group he wanted to represent. While such a statement may be taken at face value or investigated further, it can doubtlessly shed some light on selection criteria and cultural context (Pióro).

## **2.4 Poems**

An analysis of the poems that make up the anthology can be fruitful in many ways, not least because it can verify the selection criteria both for authors and for poems. However, a systematic close reading of all the texts in a collection

constitutes a major undertaking. As the main subject of this study is the anthologies and their ability to reflect intercultural relations, I will limit my forays into literary analysis to those instances in which it can shed light on the book as a whole by providing insight into true selection criteria or by challenging the values and goals laid out by editors or translators in the peritext.

## 2.5 Translation

When anthologists explain their choices in introductions, they frequently fall back on the notion of translatability. They might, for example, explain including more poems by a certain poet than by most others by arguing that his poems translate well. This, of course, begs the question about their definition of translatability – if obtainable, such a definition can give invaluable in determining the anthologist’s approach to his material. There are many ways to describe “good translations”, ranging from “the translated text can be understood without footnotes” to “the translated text must be a good poem in English.” Of course, the search for definitions does not end at noting explicit peritextual definitions – after all, someone must determine, respectively, whether the text is intelligible or whether its quality is satisfactory.

Another translation quandary faced by makers of anthologies entails finding a strategy for the handling of multiple voices. This usually revolves around the number of translators working on the anthology. A single translator may have unifying effect, and produce a highly uniform, homogeneous anthology. In theory, this approach could suit a book with a particular aesthetic agenda. However,

adopting it involves the risk of representing a group of artists (and, in the case of anthologies claiming representativeness, a whole culture) as speaking in one monotonous voice. Multiple translators, on the other hand, have a diversifying effect, as different voices and varied translation strategies coexist within one book. This can result, in theory at least, in some poets being better served by their translators than others, and a possible shift in perceived quality of the work of the represented authors may ensue.

Finally, while analysing the translations in an anthology, a distinction needs to be made between recycled work and work that has been commissioned for the book. Second-hand translations appear frequently in anthologies. This strengthens the existing canon, as poems once selected and translated resurface in subsequent books. While it allows the publisher to save precious time, this approach does occasionally raise permission and copyright issues, and may make new translations less likely to reach readers. As for commissioned work, it is liable to be influenced by the intended function of the anthology, as editors and publishers strive to make translators adjust to their vision of the book<sup>7</sup>.

### **3. WIDENING THE PARATEXT, DISCOVERING THE NARRATIVE**

As already noted above, the intended function of the anthology can be established by studying the peritext, the anthologists' and publishers' known cultural and political agendas, and the structure and contents of the anthology. However, it is vital to realise that these intended functions are not always realised; to ascertain the fate of the book in the target culture, it is necessary to move to the

book's epitext. The poetry may not fit the mould into which the anthologists try to recast it; the readers may reject the vision of the editor and focus on the text themselves; or, quite simply, the book may not be read at all. As Anthony Pym asserts in his essay on translation anthologies,

If a text is translated and anthologized but not distributed and read ... then that text cannot be really said to have transferred into the receiving culture. The printed page must be analyzed, but it is not in itself proof of transfer. One must somehow assess how many printed pages went to how many actual readers. ("Translational and Non-Translational Regimes" 267)

Having established the intended function of an anthology by performing an in-depth analysis of the book itself and the circumstances of its creation, it is important to re-open the field of analysis, and look to the epitext again in an attempt to establish the anthology's actual function, and the real efficiency of the translation process.

I have thus far confirmed the importance of paratext in the study of poetry translation anthologies, and shown how specific kinds of paratext inherent to the physical editions of anthologies can influence and alter the texts they mediate, and thus provide a commentary on the agendas governing the book. However, one more paratextual aspect has to be considered if a full analysis is to be performed, one which will not only shed light on the individual book, but also locate it within the wider context of the cultural exchange of which it is an instrument: namely,

the information not conveyed directly by any given book, and yet readily available to readers. Examples can range from commonly held stereotypes to archetypes constructed by the media. Although he does not dwell on such factors in his work, Genette acknowledges their existence, and recognizes that their influence on the reading of a literary work can be just as strong as that of any intrinsic paratext.

Every context creates a paratext. ... but to be known through an effect of "public notoriety" it does not always need to be mentioned: thus, for most readers of the *Recherche*, the two biographical facts which are the half Jewish ancestry of Proust and his homosexuality, the knowledge of which creates an inevitable paratext to the pages of his work consecrated to these two subjects. I do not say that one must know it; I only say that those who know it do not read in the same way as those who do not, and that anyone who denies this difference is making fun of us. The same applies naturally to the facts of the context... (Paratexts: Thresholds 266)

To expand on this idea I will endeavour to show that the term “paratext” can and should be interpreted very broadly in order to address all the important issues raised by the publication of an anthology of translated verse. I will also try to establish how a combined analysis of the wider cultural epitext and peritextual data from the books themselves can facilitate discoveries regarding the ways in which a given collection reflects or influences the dominating narratives defining the relations between the source and the target cultures.

### 3.1 Factual Paratext

Genette's terminology and analysis are not the only existing theoretical framework for describing this widened paratext. One alternative can be found in the idea of "megatext", which has also been suggested to describe the extraneous data which influence a book's reading. However, I have found that in its most widespread usage, this label tends to be more limiting than Genette's. A. A. den Hollander provides a representative definition:

There has to be a channel of communication and, usually, a pre-existent body of literature which supplies the text with body.

Because these aspects transcend the physical bearer of the text, but inform the reading of that text, they are called 'megatext'. Megatext is a container term for all textual artefacts that, textually, help make sense of the text; fragments of texts on which the reader, either consciously or unwittingly, draws to interpret another text. (viii, ix)

It is the exclusively "textual" nature of the megatext which I find problematic: while there is a tendency to assume that even the most peripheral epitext constitutes a text of some description, a reader may well be aware of pertinent factors which he has absorbed through other channels. Den Hollander's definition fails to take them into account, but Genette does mention them and stresses their importance.

Most often, then, the paratext is itself a text: if it is still not the text, it is already some text. But we must at least bear in mind the paratextual value that may be vested in other types of



manifestation: these may be iconic ... , material ... , or purely factual. By factual I mean the paratext that consists not of an explicit message (verbal or other) but of a fact whose existence alone, if known to the public, provides some commentary on the text and influences how the text is received. ... It is indisputable that historical awareness of the period in which a work was written is rarely immaterial to one's reading of that work. (Paratexts: Thresholds 7)

If historical awareness is fundamental for the understanding of any text, it is even more relevant in the case of anthologies of translated verse. Rather than referring to a single poet, the readers' factual knowledge will reflect on the entire group of authors represented in the book – a group frequently accepted as emblematic of the entire source culture. This increases the likelihood of sweeping interpretive statements and reductive judgments. Consequently, establishing the image of the source literature prevalent in the target culture (or at least the target readership) can help identify the dominant factual paratext, which can then be compared to the book's peritext. The agreement or tension present between them will be indicative of the creators' attitude towards the dominant narrative defining the source culture<sup>8</sup>.

This type of comparative study can be a source of insight concerning the function the anthology seeks to impart through the texts. One may balk at the idea of poetry being simply assigned a function, but openness to interpretation, which

is a common feature of literary texts in general and poetry in particular, tends to be limited by its paratext, be it peritextual or factual. One specific reading of the work can easily be encouraged by extrinsic factors, to the detriment of all others. In his analysis of Rabelais' work, Samuel Kinser identifies this as the conflict "between textual attention to polysemic openness and paratextual concern for fixity of sense, such that the interpretation of the text is oriented by paratext toward the historical, psychological, and social particulars of the text's production" (Rabelais's *Carnival* 197).

To take the metaphor of conflict a little further: anthologies of translated poetry form an especially complex battleground if the factual paratext and the intrinsic peritext do not align. The struggle tends to occur between these two, as the peritext's authors and the translators are more accessible sources of information than the authors of the originals. Readers will be aware that they are reading a foreign text, and will turn to either their general knowledge or the expert assistance of the anthologists for guidance when faced with options for multiple readings or other signs of foreignness. The translated text's effect thus constitutes the net result of a struggle between factors originating in both its source culture and its target context. As Jacquemond indicates,

like any human activity, [translation] takes place in a specific social and historical context that informs and structures it, just as it informs and structures other creative processes. In the case of translation, the operation becomes doubly complicated since, by definition, two languages and thus two cultures and two societies

are involved. A political economy of translation is consequently bound to be set within the general framework of the political economy of intercultural exchange. (139)

In other words, selections made by translators, editors and publishers cannot fail to be informed by extraneous factors ranging from the strictly literary to the social and political. Or, as Frank puts it, "the type and intensity of anthologizing depend on the quality and stability of international contacts, as well as on cross-cultural perceptions and expectations." (Frank 15) This is a point of considerable importance, since one possible inference is that one can also use a corpus of anthologies to shed light on the evolution of cultural dynamics between two literatures, two nations.

For example, a body of paratext which fails to change over time to match a changing reality can be read as symptomatic of a dominating stance on the side of the target culture. As Tejaswini Niranjana notes in her study of the interplay between translation, post-structuralism, and post-colonial history, "one of the classic moves of colonial discourse (as, for example, in *Orientalism*) is to present the colonial subject as unchanging and immutable, historicity - which includes the idea of change - is a notion that needs to be taken seriously." (37) Once a dichotomy establishes itself between two literatures (or indeed entire cultures), translation anthologies inevitably have to choose a position in relation to the emerging division. Rainer Schulte, meanwhile, shows how anthologies can reflect evolution in their source culture. "A comparative study - just within the frame of American and English literature - reveals the changes that these anthologies have

undergone in the last few years: the percentage of women included in the current editions of anthologies is a good illustration of how a particular political and social perspective has influenced the direction of anthology editing" (137). Schulte is speaking of monolingual anthologies, and in this context, his observation may lead to relatively straightforward conclusions: society is changing, and as a result, factual paratext such as a growing recognition of women's rights makes its way into the books' peritext. When transferred to the field of translation anthologies, however, the level of complexity increases: the paratext reflects more than just the evolution of one society, but rather the relations between two distinct cultures.

No study of anthologies of translated literature can afford to ignore the interplay between the book's intrinsic paratext and the factual paratext that surrounds it without losing the chance to ascertain a number of crucial features. As Kittel puts it, "distinguishing basic types or models of anthologies in accordance with the choice of authors and corpora of texts is a fairly mechanical procedure which does not lead very far unless the relevant historical backgrounds and contexts - linguistic, literary, aesthetic, socio-cultural, economic, political, and biographical - are taken into account." (x)

### **3.2 Public Narratives**

The question remains of how one can define information uncovered by a thorough study of the above "backgrounds and contexts." One type of framework which makes it easier for cultures to communicate and evolve is, quite simply, stories, or narratives, which hold sway over the public's imagination and define

people's approaches and reactions to everyday phenomena. Mona Baker defines them as follows:

Public narratives are defined as stories elaborated by and circulating among social and institutional formations larger than the individual, such as the family, religious or educational institution, the media, and the nation. ... Literature of course constitutes one of the most powerful institutions for disseminating public narratives in any society (33).

In translation, a narrative facilitates considerably the assimilation of foreign notions and values, as it has the power to justify them and present a manageable, frequently simplified vision of the foreign. And if literature acts as the primary vehicle for the transfer and dissemination of narratives, and translation anthologies give their makers considerable room for engaging with those narratives through selection and paratextual manipulation, then looking for the principal narratives in a given period and establishing how the books relay them and relate to them becomes a key task.

I noted earlier the importance of the level to which a book's paratext reflects changes in the source culture. This phenomenon can also be investigated through the prism of narrative:

Public narratives circulating in any society can and do change significantly, sometimes within the span of a few years, even months. ... Which variant of a narrative persists and acquires currency is of course largely a question of the power structures in

which the various narrative versions are embedded as well as the determination with which their proponents promote and defend them. (Baker 33)

Adding the element of translation to the concept of narrative provides ample space for “subtle ways in which public narratives are adapted and mediated across cultural boundaries”. (34) Baker also notes that “Translators and interpreters play a crucial role in disseminating public narratives within their own communities”. She quotes Maria Tymoczko, who observes that “translators may also be loyal to dissident ideologies internal to a culture, or to affiliations and agendas external to a culture” (qtd. in Baker 36). Their position as sole providers of the narrative in the target culture gives them the power to spin it according to their convictions.

Translators and interpreters also participate in circulating domestic public narratives beyond their national boundaries, either in an effort to gain a wider following for those narratives or to ‘expose’ and challenge them by appealing to a foreign audience with a different view of the world. (34)

### **3.3 Reception**

Even the strongest narrative, however, will fail to make an impact unless it is heard – and even then, the complex interplay between the book’s own narrative and those present in the reading public’s consciousness renders its precise role difficult to predict. One method that might facilitate reception studies would be the

analysis of data obtained from publishers: information concerning print runs, sales numbers, and tactics employed in the promotion of the anthology would be a priceless source of feedback. However, publishers are notoriously uncooperative, and obtaining such figures might prove, in many cases, nearly impossible. A more realistic strategy could consist of observing publishing trends; if the appearance of an anthology is followed by a spate of similar publications, it might be interpreted as a sign of the book's commercial success. On the other hand, the appearance of one successful volume collecting translations of poetry from a relatively less popular culture ~~may~~ may deter other publishers from producing other volumes focusing on the same country, area, or period, as they may assume that whatever niche may have existed on the market has been filled by the first collection. In such a case, perhaps the best source of feedback can be found in professional magazines for publishers and booksellers, where market analyses are occasionally published and commented upon.

Reactions can also be assessed by analysing reviews gathered by the book. The very number of journal reviews (both print and online) is a testament to the impact of the anthology, and their content, tone, and focus showcase the reactions of the critical world. Another medium that should not be overlooked is newspapers, as their reviews tend to reach far greater audiences; if any appear, the book can be assumed to have reached a larger readership, extending beyond the narrow group of experts in the field. The hardest task, however, could prove to be establishing the response of actual readers, as opposed to specialists and those who were paid to review the book. While reader surveys are logistically nearly

unfeasible if they are to be in any way representative and statistically meaningful, a potential mine of direct, unedited reader feedback can be found on online bookselling websites and readers' forums. While time consuming, a search of selected internet sites can yield invaluable material in the form of actual, not idealised, reader response.

An anthology can also be judged by the influence it exerts on its target group or culture. While also difficult to measure, possible signs of a book's impact on the scholarly world can include its adoption as handbook in academic circles or in schools, and the number of times it is cited in essays, journal articles, and books. An anthology's impact on artistic circles may prove much more challenging to assess – in fact, it seems nearly impossible for newer books. However, if imitations and reactions against a certain book crop up over the years, it can be assumed not to have gone unnoticed by writers and poets from the target culture. This, however, is usually part of a broader phenomenon, and can be harder to trace to a specific book, unless the poet in question acknowledges his source of inspiration explicitly (as, for example, Seamus Heaney did with regards to Herbert's poetry in Miłosz's collection<sup>9</sup>).



## CHAPTER 2: POLISH POETRY SEEN FROM WITHIN

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the period extending roughly from 1980 to the present, as perceived by Polish literary critics. I refer exclusively to Polish-language sources (all quotations are in my own translation, and page numbers refer to Polish editions of the cited books). It is not my goal to present an objective and exhaustive history of Polish literature in that period. I focus instead on showing the critical and artistic context in which poetry was written, stressing the diversity of the output of both poets and critics at any given point in history. I also try to mention the most important poets who left their mark on the period and briefly characterise the poetics they represent. All this information will make it possible to assess choices made by anthologists of Polish poetry ~~by anthologists~~, and the data that will prove useful when comparing and contrasting the image Poles had of their own poetry with the one that was made available to English-speaking scholars, authors, and readers.

### 1. THE POLISH LITERARY SCENE IN THE LATE 70'S AND EARLY 80'S: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

“Polish literature,” writes Anna Skoczek in the introduction to her book Poezja świadectwa i sprzeciwu (eng. Poetry of witness and opposition), “has always stood by the nation in times of great need. It was not to be any different when history chose December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1981 as the date for the next momentous event” (5). Over the two years that preceded that crucial date, country-wide strikes

triggered by rises in food prices and general discontent combined with the emergence of the Solidarity movement to signal the consolidation of a democratic opposition to the authoritarian government. The Soviet Union reacted by pressuring the communist rulers of Poland to solve the issues within their country by any means necessary; in case of failure, the threat of intervention from Soviet armed force loomed large. In 1981, martial law was declared in a bid by the government to secure the powers it needed to contain and quell the growing rebellion<sup>10</sup>.

One of the reasons why the government resorted to the extreme measure that was martial law was the increasingly organised nature of the opposition. One of the signs of its development was the emergence and rapid growth of the so-called Second Circulation, a network of illegal but uncensored publishers and distributors which made it possible for literary life to grow beyond the control of the communist party's apparatchiks. While there are those who would argue that since dissident publishing structures inevitably emerge as a consequence of any censorship exercised from above, the Second Circulation could be traced as far back as 1946 (see Skoczek 5), most critics agree that its real beginning came in 1976, when the first independent magazines were printed by the newly formed the “Komitet Obrony Robotników” or Worker's Defense Committee<sup>11</sup>. There followed a sudden proliferation of unofficial magazines: Zapis, Puls, Spotkania, Droga, Hutnik, followed by Arka and Wezwanie. 1977 saw the creation of the first unofficial publishing house, the “Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza” (“Independent Publishing House”), quickly followed by others which went on functioning

throughout the period of martial law. “Oficyna poetów i malarzy” and Przedświt in Warsaw, KOS and Oficyna Literacka in Cracow, Młoda Polska in Gdańsk and Spotkania in Lublin number among the most ~~important~~ important ones. A large network of cultural institutions independent ~~from~~ of state structures was established. They published several hundred works between 1980 and 1982 alone, and remained active throughout the 80's (see Skoczek 6; Czapliński 167-169).

However, access to Second Circulation publications was limited – they were under constant surveillance by government agents, and repressive measures awaited those who worked with them. Furthermore, they often struggled for resources – print runs were small and distribution difficult. And so, another strategy for sidestepping censorship emerged: publishing abroad. “This practice,” writes poet and literary historian Leszek Szaruga, “which used to be sporadic, became so popular that the Literary Institute in Paris started a special series, entitled ‘Bez cenzury’ (eng. Without Censorship), where Brandys, Barańczak, Krynicki, Michnik and other authors with no hope of being printed by official state houses could publish their work” (Szaruga 292).

This alternative cultural scene grew so rapidly because historical events of 1980 and 1981 provided an “impulse of such strength that literary creativity exploded with surprising force, and brought about a phenomenon called the poetry of martial law” (Skoczek 6). The list of poets who rose to the call of history and contributed politically involved verse spans all generations writing at the time. From among established, “professional” poets, Skoczek mentions Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Wiktor Woroszyński, Artur Zagajewski, Ryszard

Krynicki, Julian Kornhauser, Stanisław Barańczak, Barbara Sadowska, Leszek Szaruga, Antoni Pawlak, Piotr Sommer, Jarosław Rymkiewicz, Lech Dymarski, Jacek Bierezin, Leszek Budrewicz, Lothar Herbst, Tomasz Jastrun, Jan Polkowski, and Bronisław Maj. Besides those well known authors, a host of (often anonymous) amateurs felt compelled to contribute their own work to the cause, which means the quality of poetry produced in the first two years of the 80's was more than uneven (Skoczek 7).

Indeed, the risk of compromising their artistic ambitions awaited all the poets who took their words to the barricades. This metaphor is closer to reality than it might seem: under the circumstances, many of the poets felt they were participating in a battle. The authors experienced “the conviction that they could finally make their own choice, and that their words were socially significant. Readers browsing forbidden books were conscious of participating in a major political and moral event” (Stala 281). Romantic war rhetoric aside, the appearance and spread of the Second Circulation meant that not only were there no forbidden topics, but poetry could reach a slew of readers desperate for a banner beneath which they could rally; this resulted, unsurprisingly, in the engagement with political topics. However, this was not without consequences, as the choice of subject matter became one of the main criteria in the critical assessment and reception of new writing. Literary historian and critic Przemysław Czapliński writes:

In those days, literature was not required to be 'good' in aesthetic terms, but rather socially important and relevant, which meant it

had to take sides in the quarrel between the government and the rest of society. If it chose aesthetics over politics, it doomed itself to an existence somewhere on the margins of culture. (169)

In point of fact, the division between aesthetics and politics that Czapliński describes may seem over-simplistic. While there can be no doubt that the literary value of a large percentage of the militant poetry produced in those years is questionable due to the eagerness of the authors to further their cause at the cost of style (see Skoczek 6, 219; Stala 280-281), political involvement did not automatically deprive a poet's work of artistic merit. Many years later, Stanisław Barańczak suggested a relatively straightforward way of distinguishing the ambitious from the utilitarian:

When we look back today at the literature of martial law, we see that artistically good texts differ from the bad ones in one simple aspect: the first always involve a sense of duality, a contradictory tension between the feeling of solidarity with the community and the loneliness of the individual in a crowd. ... Meanwhile, texts that are poor from a literary perspective tend to oscillate between the two extremes: the poet either subscribes to the needs of the collective to the extent that he becomes invisible, hidden behind those common values, or he breaks his ties with his community and raises himself so far above it that he become the only object that can be seen. (Barańczak & Biedrzycki 125)

It is important to note that although both texts quoted above were written long after the fall of communism, let alone the lifting of the martial law (Barańczak's words date from 1993, while the texts of Czapliński, Skoczek, and Stala were all published after 2000), a consciousness of the dangers accompanying the involvement of poetry in politics arose very quickly.

And so, at the beginning of the introduction to his 1982 anthology, Poezja Stanu Wojennego (i.e. the Poetry of Martial Law), Stanisław Barańczak states that his primary goal was to record the traumatic experience that the events of 1981 had been for Polish society as a whole. He is reluctant to assess the poetic value of the texts – instead, in his analysis, he focuses on their role as the expression of a feeling of discontent and rejection pervading the entire nation. “The very core of our cultural tradition has been grievously wounded. This is what the poetry collected in this volume relates, often acting on intuition, not fully conscious, tentative and faltering.” (Barańczak, Poezja Stanu Wojennego, 14)

Barańczak's lack of enthusiasm for equating a noble message with poetic mastery is indicative of a wider trend. In the same year, Włodzimierz Bolecki warned that “we can expect a tendency to resort to simplified poetics, as well as a movement away from literary craftsmanship and towards the literal” (qtd. in Czapliński et al. 157). Jan Józef Szczepański cautioned in 1983 that while “it is obvious that poetry should bear witness to its own times, ... treating it instrumentally, to achieve short-term, concrete goals is an abuse. An abuse of the sacred function of the word. As long as we remember that, humanist culture still stands a chance” (qtd. in Czapliński et al. 178).

Another predictable danger was the increasingly biased literary criticism within the Second Circulation. Of course, this was to be expected: in a black and white world where “good” and “bad” are so clearly defined, it is hard to criticise a text supporting the “good” side without appearing to take the opposing stance, a factor which encouraged the replacement of textual analysis with a scrutiny of the author's intentions and convictions. A major discussion took place among authors and scholars on that subject in 1985 in a number of Second Circulation magazines. Participants pointed out that indeed, a definite tendency to praise and promote the work of those authors who had chosen to embrace the correct political outlook was emerging. Many of those involved questioned the idealised vision of a noble people suffering under the yoke of an oppressive but stupid government, and stressed that the lack of a brave, courageous criticism willing to unveil unpopular truths may do considerable damage to independent Polish culture in general and literature in particular (see Czapliński et al. 209-210).

This urge to question easy binary oppositions was also reflected in Polish anthologies. In 1984, Barańczak published a second collection of verse from his new home in the United States, with the benefit of more hindsight, which bore the title Poeta pamięta: poezja świadectwa i sprzeciwu (i.e. The Poet Remembers: Poetry Of Witness and Resistance) – a fragment of Miłosz's famous poem, written in the 50s under Stalinist rule, and often featured in Solidarność rhetoric in the early 80s. While the title seems like an easy choice, Barańczak felt the need to justify his subtitle over four pages of introductory deliberations, explaining as he did the criteria he used to select the poems included in his book, and elaborating

on his understanding of how poetry can function as a reaction to social upheavals without compromising artistic integrity.

Barańczak explain, at length, why he has found terms such as “political poetry”, “activist poetry”, “public poetry” or “moral poetry” unacceptable, even though each of them has been used in reference to Polish writing from the period. He rejects “political” outright, stating that it is only applicable when understood too broadly, that is if one agrees that any action or event shaping the fate of mankind is political; he feels the narrower reading of the term, that is, representing the programme of a political faction, does not apply to any of the texts from the book. “Activist poetry” he dismisses as pamphleteering and propaganda with, at best, very ephemeral value, even when nobly motivated. Public poetry fails as a category since poetry often exposes public matters most effectively from a private perspective. Finally, designating a group of poems as “moral poetry”, while rooted in traditional Polish literary criticism, eliminates a whole set of texts and authors who cannot be easily qualified as moralists, but whose work renders the complexities of life in communist Poland, complete with ethical quandaries, with unequalled mastery (see Barańczak, *Poeta pamięta*, 5-7).

Barańczak justifies his own choice of label – “witness and resistance” – by arguing that witnessing the times and resisting their folly still allows poems to remain an art, without turning into news reports or political treatises. Indeed, he believes that poetry is naturally predisposed to fulfil precisely these two functions, due to its personal perspective, concrete nature and ability to challenge language designed to obfuscate the truth (see Barańczak, *Poeta pamięta*, 8-9). While he is



aware of those who would have poetry remain pure art, he rejects their stance as quixotic.

Whoever dreams of a return to “pure poetry” nowadays would do well to remember that there is little purity in writing “pure verse” in dirty times, but also that pure poetry has never really existed. Neither Dante, nor John Donne, nor Goethe, nor Norwid wrote it. Poetry cannot exist without experience ... and if our everyday experience is one of violence and falsehood, it makes more sense to turn it into a source of strength than to seek solace in escapism.

(Barańczak, Poeta pamięta 9)

Two years after his first collection of poetry reacting to Martial Law, Barańczak has written a defence of verse reacting to everyday reality – but only provided the poets remain first and foremost writers, resisting the urge to take on other roles. This introduction serves as a good illustration of the discussions characterising the Polish literary scene of the times, as authors strove to codify what most felt instinctively: that atrocities cannot be left unrecorded, but literature had to find ways to perform the function of witness while remaining, first and foremost, an art.

It should also be noted that the Second Circulation did not have a monopoly on quality poetry: the early 80's saw an evolution in the field of state-approved literature as well, as the waning power of the communist government coincided with a loosening of the censors' rules. Indeed, some changes came as reaction to pressures from the unofficial circuit, such as the gradual introduction of

literature originally printed abroad as a response to the foreign publishing boom. The Nobel prize awarded to Czesław Miłosz in 1980, for example, was a strong factor in accelerating the appearance among official publications of texts previously only available from outside the country (see Szaruga 1993, 292-294).

However, the contrast in how the poetry was presented to the reading public remained. The anthology Poeta jest jak dziecko: poezja młodych (Poets Are Like Children: The Poetry of the Young), published by the state-owned press Młodzieżowa Agencja Wydawnicza, provides a fitting example. The book appeared in print in 1987, but it was compiled and annotated in 1983, i.e. in the same period as the collections edited by Barańczak mentioned earlier in this chapter. One of the very few officially sanctioned volumes attempting a holistic depiction of the Polish poetry scene<sup>12</sup>, it can also be construed as an answer to the underground poetry scene, distributed in the 1st circulation and heavily promoted by official channels.

Poeta jest jak dziecko features an introduction and an afterword of considerable length, in which the editors, Maciej Chrzanowski, Zbigniew Jerzyna, and Jerzy Koperski, clarify their main goal: to record the poetry of a new generation, the one that has come to replace Nowa Fala – an important literary movement opposing the government and its idiom, which I will describe in greater detail later in this chapter. The editors decry the fact that poets whose debuts were made in the late 70s and early 80s have gone unnoticed by readers and critics, and explain that a critical distinction between the two age groups is urgently needed, as the younger colleagues of Barańczak, Kornhauser and Zagajewski differ from

their predecessors both in language and in worldview (see *Poeta jest jak dziecko*, 5-7). They explain that while “both generations share a similar idea of the nature of reality ... their assessment thereof leads to dramatically different decisions and reactions. This could be defined concisely as a shift of perspective from the public to the private.” (*Poeta jest jak dziecko*, 7)

The editors attack Nowa Fala poets on several fronts. Specifically, they maintain that the group’s poetics discriminate against particular people in favour of the collective; that their concern with social change ignores the fate of individuals; that the reality which Nowa Fala poets condemn is in fact a construct of their own making; that they make use of the myth of the poet-bard to eschew any need for justifying their opinions and judgments; and that the poetry has lost sight of its professed ambitions and has become a goal unto itself. (see *Poeta jest jak dziecko*, 385-393). “Homo socius, the protagonist of those poems, is a one-dimensional creature, lacking any cultural roots ... Meanwhile, the poetry of the young is real poetry, not an upside-down newscast.” (*Poeta jest jak dziecko*, 386)

The notion that Nowa Fala is an outdated movement which no longer produces work of any value is thus presented as an undeniable fact.

According to Chrzanowski, Jerzyna, and Koperski, the alleged invalidation of Nowa Fala poetics is tantamount to its disappearance from the literary scene. The vacuum thus created needs to be filled, and the government, they claim, has been doing its part in a push to promote new writing, with considerable success.

On the one hand, the state increased its activities as a patron of the arts in answer to the needs not only of writers themselves, but also of local governments

which rightly interpret the development of local poetic movements as the proof of reaching a certain cultural standard. On the other hand, cultural officials were keen to ‘produce’ a new generation of authors who would occupy the space left by Nowa Fala. In practice, this led to enforcing quotas of books by new poets on publishers and preferential treatments for developing talent. They claim that young poets had never been cared for so assiduously as in the previous five years. (Poeta jest jak dziecko, 389)

In their opinion, young poets reject the shared views of their predecessors and turn inward, to dissect their own, personal experiences. They favour a more confessional and intuitive approach over “the dry literary history of Barańczak and Zagajewski ‘s sociological formulae and columnist style.” (Poeta jest jak dziecko, 392). They are, in short, real artists, defined as “bearers and proclaimers of truth, free by definition” (Poeta jest jak dziecko, 393).

Although this call for artistic integrity paradoxically repeats some of the ideas Barańczak outlined in his own anthologies, the assessment of the state of Polish poetry summarised above differs radically from the image of the literary scene presented by poets functioning primarily in the Second Circulation. First and foremost, there is no mention anywhere in the book’s peritext of the formative experiences for both generations: neither the events of 1976 nor the introduction of Martial Law are referred to at any point in the book. In addition, Nowa Fala was most active during the 70s, its influence extended well into the 80s (and even beyond), and the idea of a gap created by a suddenly obsolete generation does not appear in independent critical writing of the period, or indeed in contemporary

sources. Poets and critics alike focused instead on their quest for poetics which would allow them to record the atrocities that surrounded them without relinquishing art, whilst retaining an individual voice.

The early 80's were a traumatic period for Polish society: cruel governmental repressions and the lack of basic freedoms, compounded by widespread poverty and shortages in most basic goods combined to form an experience that would leave the whole country reeling. It was also a period of growth for literature, to which people turned for moral guidance and social commentary. Still, as political engagement became nearly mandatory for any poet vying for readers and recognition, the quality of the poetry itself was in danger of suffering from an overly utilitarian approach. In the next section, I will show the way one group of poets found to deal with the conflicting pressures of socio-historical context and artistic integrity, and some alternatives to their solution.

## **2. “NOWA FALA”**

Towards the end of the 60's, a number of prominent new poets emerged on the Polish literary scene. They never really formed a common, official movement, and lacked a unified artistic programme; indeed, from the very start, there were major differences between their poetic styles, their subject matters, their sources and strategies. However, they did share the same formative experiences and several key ideas about the position literature should have in society. While it seemed that there was little beyond those few elements to bring those poets together, already in 1970-1971 critics began speaking of a new generation, and

names such as “Nowa Fala” (New Wave) and “Pokolenie 68” (Generation ’68) started cropping up in literary magazines and discussions. The poets involved included, among others, Stanisław Barańczak, Jacek Bierezin, Zdzisław Jaskuła, Krzysztof Karasek, Julian Kornhauser, Jerzy Kronhold, Ryszard Krynicki, Jarosław Markiewicz, Leszek Moczulski, Adam Zagajewski. Other important authors, such as Lech Dymarski, Jerzy Piątkowski, Wit Jaworski, Ewa Lipska and Stanisław Stabro were born in the same generation, but are not always counted as adherents of “Nowa Fala”. Among the authors listed above, Barańczak, Kornhauser, Krynicki and Zagajewski were perceived as pillars supporting the movement, and it is perhaps their work critics reference most frequently when mentioning the New Wave (Nyczek 3).

I mentioned formative experiences: at the time, a student opposition movement came into being, motivated by patriotic ideas and an idealistic yearning for freedom, but, interestingly, without anti-socialist or even anti-communist overtones. Hasty and excessively violent governmental repressions triggered mass demonstrations on the streets, which in turn led to even more brutal solutions from the side of the ruling party. Campuses were successfully pacified by force, using both riot squads and secret police infiltrators, but this method resulted in a deep crisis in politics and academia. Although the movement was largely limited to students, cut off from the worlds of labourers and workers, the government seemed to be on the verge of panic at the prospect of the protests growing to include these groups. As a result, the decision to allow nationalist factions to present the events using chauvinistic and anti-semitic rhetoric, accusing a fictional

“Zionist” group of orchestrating the student protests, was taken by Władysław Gomułka, then First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party. This prompted an even greater escalation of violence, and resulted in a forced exodus of thousands of Polish Jews. While in the long term the unrest led to a “loosening” of the system (by weakening Gomułka’s position, making room for the more open Edward Gierek, and preparing ground for the workers’ uprising in 1970), in the short term the students seemed to have suffered a complete defeat, with numerous beatings, arrests, secret police files and ruined academic careers to prove it (Sołtysiak and Stępień 3-7; Eisler 758-760).

This experience was to be a strong shock for young Polish artists, discrediting Marxism once and for all, linking it forever to the oppressive communist government and unveiling the ideology’s use as a mere justification for existing administrative structures (Szaruga 254). However, the experience was not a strictly political one. To quote Stanisław Barańczak, poet, translator, and prominent member of “Nowa Fala”:

Many among us had no particular political beliefs, many did not know, in those early days, what really was going in Poland and what it was that we should rebel against, but one thing was beyond a doubt. The press was lying. It was not economic exploitation, not the lack of civic freedoms, not the inconsistencies inherent in the polity that angered us most – us twenty-somethings, at the threshold of an adult and conscious life – the main source of indignation were

lies, the omnipresent untruths replicated in millions of copies. (183)

Szaruga agrees with Barańczak's view, stressing that representatives of that generation lacked clear political convictions at the time of the events of March 1968. Their reactions, he posits, were purely emotional, and moral categories took precedence over political concerns. He concludes that for that very reason, it was morality, rather than a specific political outlook, that lay at the foundations of "Nowa Fala" (Szaruga 255-256). In literary terms, this meant that the formation of this new movement gave the numerous groups and formations present on the Polish scene a point of reference against which they could define themselves; a hierarchy which ranked ethical and moral choices, both in life and in art, above deliberations centering on aesthetics (Szaruga 252).

From the late 60's onwards, attempts had been made in Poland to participate in various aspects of European culture by emulating its avant-garde: formal experiments in Western style approaching abstraction made their way onto the Polish literary scene. Critic and anthologist Tadeusz Nyczek writes that "Polish culture, freed in the previous decade from the servitude of social realism, proceeded to eagerly participate in the adventures of international art, sharing all of its faith and ridicule, all of its discoveries and blunders" (11). In keeping with the spirit of the 80s, however, Nowa Fala took a firm stance against what its members thought were frivolous games, treating them as a morally contemptible form of escapism: as Zagajewski bluntly stated, "there is something repulsive in engaging in aestheticism under totalitarian rule" (Nyczek 11). Poets belonging to



the New Wave postulated instead a non-naïve realism, which would show the world as it is, free from illusions, packaging, and masks, and thus by its very nature a polar opposite to the reality of the propaganda favoured by the communist government.

In her monograph “Poetyka Nowej Fali” (The poetics of “Nowa Fala”) Bożena Tokarz has tried to identify the distinctive features of the group’s poetic idiom. She states that:

The authors of Świat nie przedstawiony<sup>13</sup> offer a poetics of “direct speech”, which they define as: 1) a continuity of culture and a lack of civilisation-related determinants, 2) the autonomy of a literary work, 3) the modification of its specific nature through the use of everyday language, 4) a balance between tradition and contemporaneity, 5) realism, 6) expressionism and non-objectivity as a strategy, 7) simplicity, 8) irony, 9) metaphorical reinterpretation of the world, 10) a confrontation between the symbolic and the concrete. The main goal of these authors is to interact with reality and change it. (141-142)

Following Leszek Szaruga’s observations, I have, above, called “Nowa Fala” a point of reference for other literary groups. Indeed, although many poets, as already stated, found their inspiration in the same historical events, the aesthetic decisions and ideological conclusions they derived from those experiences differed considerably, and Nowa Fala provided a convenient, generally recognisable background for self-definition. The Cracow-based grouping “Tylicz”

(named after a local town) and the “Konfederacja Nowego Romantyzmu” (New Romanticism Confederation) from Warsaw can serve as examples. Both echoed “Nowa Fala” in citing the unrest of the year 1968 as the creative impulse behind their work; nevertheless, their artistic programmes and the poetry they produced differed radically from what the New Wave sought to promote. “Tylicz” chose an attitude bordering on escapism, turning away from the politics of the city to look for existential truths in landscapes, choosing nature over culture and emotion over philosophy in their quest for sanctuary from what they perceived to be a destructive civilisation. While they did not shun social commentary altogether, they tended to formulate it – if at all – within the context of the family and the home. They also expressed the feeling of otherness and deracination of those members of various social classes and groups who, in the post-war period, became part of the intelligentsia and gained a new, though frequently tragic, level of self-consciousness (Stabro 102). Meanwhile, poets from the New Romanticism Confederation saw themselves as the heirs of Adam Mickiewicz and Andrzej Trzebiński, and called for the recognition of the duties of poetry, which they defined as an “aesthetic intervention into the nation’s consciousness” (Nyczek 6). They believed literature was responsible for the political fate of the nation, and that its mission was to bring back traditional Polish values, such as honour and tolerance, while maintaining that authors should strive for “a poetry of the maximum, a philosophy of the maximum, ... and ask for the impossible – or stop mattering. Polishness does not come for free, Polishness has to be endlessly created” (Głębicka 416).

I have so far referred to “Nowa Fala” as if the movement were homogeneous. In fact, when compared to groups with profiles defined as sharply as the two described above (and there were many more, including, for example, the neo-Marxist “Grupa 848”, the avant-garde “Kontekst”, etc.), “Nowa Fala” seems to be a relatively poorly defined unit, assembling as it did authors with varying views on politics and disparate aesthetic preferences. Bożena Tokarz clearly states that “despite common opinions to the contrary ... the language of “Nowa Fala” is far from uniform. Engaging in demystifying wordplay, which is common practice in Barańczak’s verse, was, for many poets, just a stage, which they quickly left behind them” (112). Stanisław Stabro shares this opinion, and further argues that “although they are easier to spot from today’s perspective, certain tendencies and trends, which may, at first glance, appear mutually exclusive, have always co-existed within ‘Nowa Fala’” (Stabro, “Poezja i historia” 390-391). To quote an interview with Julian Kornhauser, one of the movement’s members:

The poetics of “Nowa Fala” are a myth. The poetry of the 60's and 70's never established a single, uniform convention. Various trends developed together: the linguistic poetry of Krynicki and Barańczak (who were quite unlike each other), the internally diverse and thus difficult to define body of work of the “Teraz” group, ... the individual paths of Wojacek and Lipska, the subversion of formalism in the poetry of Karasek and Markiewicz, etc., etc. (Michajłow)

The New Wave was thus not a harmonious group unified by a strong manifesto; indeed, it never did define itself as one group with a set membership, and most Polish literary historians have their own ideas about the group's makeup and scope<sup>14</sup>. It may more accurately be described as a sort of common endeavour undertaken by a number of poets sharing certain aesthetic preferences and agreeing on a number of basic moral convictions. According to Nyczek, the reason for the blurred boundaries of the group and the diverse aesthetic stances of its members was its multi-faceted nature. "Nowa Fala" was far from a purely literary movement, nor was it limited to artistic or ideological dimensions. The issue at stake, Nyczek argues, was a new way of life, and the efforts of the adherents of the New Wave, be they poets, writers, painters, musicians, actors, or film makers, were all firmly located in those places where life and art interacted and intersected (6, 7). Tokarz concurs, stating that "we should stress that the movement we call "Nowa Fala" was not one-dimensional. First of all, it encompassed not only poets, but also other artistic genres, such as film, theatre, arts and music. It was a broad cultural movement, merging diverse tendencies and points of view; the area in which they crystallised best, however, was poetry"(13).

Still, the idea that art should refer to reality and have a direct influence on life does not seem like a sufficient foundation for an artistic foundation of such scope – after all, as I explained in the previous section, this was the basic concept behind most of the poetry created in the Second Circulation. Consequently, the question may well be asked about the reasons why this seemingly ill-defined and unsystematic movement rose to play a prominent position in Polish culture –all the

more so since it seemed political factors were far from favourable: before its quick rise to prominence in the early 80's, "Nowa Fala" was actively repressed by the government of the People's Republic of Poland, who tried to stop the group from spreading ideas dangerous to the continued growth of socialism in a number of ways (Nyczek 8).

Nyczek identifies the events of March 1968 as the main reason for what he calls the New Wave's "success". He argues that students, humiliated by their failed attempt at a revolution, felt the need to vent their frustration by demanding the truth and looking for a meaningful way of life under a totalitarian regime. Nowa Fala became, quite openly, part of this youthful rebellion. While "Tylicz" turned away from politics, the New Romantics refused to accept internationalist tendencies, and "Kontekst" members snubbed what they considered the hopelessly old-fashioned literary conventions of Nowa Fala, the latter movement's openness to history and the willingness of its members to get involved directly in the events of their day proved to be an effective way of assuring itself a pivotal position in Polish culture. Indeed, as Nyczek rightly points out, the organisation of a democratic opposition, the establishment of an independent channel of distribution for press and books alike, the emergence of independent trade unions – all these happened with the active participation of "Nowa Fala", and of people who shared the movement's convictions. Some of the poets from the movement joined the burgeoning political opposition, and began laying the foundations for a new reality, convinced that it was a natural consequence of the ethical and existential beliefs of their generation (Nyczek 8-10, 13). This meant that poets were

perceived as being intimately connected to the most important events in the country's suddenly changing political scene, and translated directly into a considerable demand for their verse.

The multitude of morally ambiguous choices that faced the citizens of the People's Republic of Poland led them to look for moral authorities, and poets were happy to oblige and play the role of judges and advisors: this concerns the New Wave poets, of course, but also older and well established names, such as Herbert (whose work encouraged such readings anyway) and Miłosz (who had the role thrust upon him).

Sosnowski and Klejnocki warn, however, that such a positioning of poetry within a culture can be detrimental in the long run, and distinguish four specific consequences of looking to the poets for help in the quotidian fight against an oppressive government. First, they claim that literature is then forced to judge the world, rather than describe it, focusing on unchanging values and ignoring the evolving reality; this also leads to the disappearance of grey areas, and the encroachment of the public onto the private: no decision can be neutral in the reality of the never-ending struggle for decency. Second, they point out that the primarily political function of literary life led to the disappearance of its ludic aspect: understandably, publishers working in the Second Circulation preferred to take risks for texts connected to the opposition's cause, rather than those that were purely aesthetic or entertaining. Third, in such a bipolar world the moral authority of the poets seemed unquestionable, as long as they stayed away from the suspicious world of the 1<sup>st</sup> circulation; this led to the assumption that they always

speak the truth (since the opponents always lie) – automatically discrediting all opponents in a way reminiscent of the propaganda of the very officials the poets were denigrating. And fourth – the situation after December 13<sup>th</sup> isolated Poland from the rest of the world, especially the west, and while the world debated on post-structural philosophy, post-modernism, New Age, the influence of information technology, etc., the country remained firmly within the grooves formed over forty years of resistance to communist rulers (see Klejnocki and Sosnowski 17-20).

Marian Stala notes that as the fall of communism began to seem more and more inevitable, Polish poetry readied itself for a world where there would be no more clear-cut evil to confront. After the fall, politics would no longer constitute a threat to Polish literature, but neither would they justify it. Television and the press would be sufficient communication channels for the purposes of political parties. Poetry would lose its role in building anti-totalitarian consciousness, and, in a wider perspective, its influence on political change in the country (see Stala 281-282). By 1989, the year when Polish reality underwent the most radical change since 1945, the question concerning the future of poetry seemed very pressing indeed.

### **3. THE BREAKTHROUGH: 1989 AND BEYOND**

1989 was one of the defining moments in the history of Poland. The year was a watershed from the social, economic, and, above all, political

perspectives: the fall of the communist regime, whose power had been waning throughout the 80's, marked the end of an era that had begun with the end of the Second World War. An entirely new political system was instituted, and all existing structures and mechanisms for the creation and dissemination of culture became obsolete; this included both state-subsidised publishing houses and the whole semi-clandestine Second Circulation network. The West became more accessible, and a new capitalist economy completely altered almost every aspect of everyday life in the country. It only seems common sense that poetry written in those years would reflect that.

Indeed, critics Marian Stala and Marcin Wiecezorek both state explicitly that there were strong expectations that changes of that magnitude on the social and political planes would inevitably be accompanied by equally spectacular developments in the arts in general and literature in particular. They cite dates such as 1918, 1956, 1976, when major political upheavals resulted in the rise to prominence of formations such as the Skamander group, “pokolenie Kolumbów”, and “Nowa Fala”, respectively. Wiecezorek formulates the thesis that as a result of those connections, “the link between poetry and political change became deeply rooted in popular imaginings of literature” (Wiecezorek 16). Taking it a step further, Marian Stala contends that “the conviction that momentous political events trigger analogous transformations in the spiritual sphere ... as well as the memory of [1918 and 1956] and the cultural events that happened then fuelled a general expectation of breakthrough and an appetite for major changes.” (Stala 292) In other words, most Poles, be they poets, critics, or readers, assumed that the



fall of the communist regime would bring about major innovations in the field of poetry. After all, the enemy had fallen, the poets' duty had been done: they were free to move on to something new.

These expectations deserve a closer look, as they have informed the production, promotion, and reception of poetry in the 90's to a considerable extent. As critic Joanna Orska points out, talking about breakthroughs forces a certain rhetoric upon the speaker, which she finds repetitive to the point of resembling a ritual. The “old” inexorably has to be compared unfavourably to the “new”. The “new,” in turn, can be analysed, sought, or questioned, but the scholar's hopes will always be pinned on it. Orska points out the paradox whereby “that which is ‘new’, and thus unknown, is usually required to have certain specific features. The “new” is to be a ‘masterpiece’, or at least a ‘work of brilliance’; it definitely has to be original, differ fundamentally from its predecessors, and break ties with tradition” (Orska 13).

Despite the limitations stemming from the use of breakthrough rhetoric, this framework constitutes a major critical tool for scholars of Polish poetry. In fact, Orska cites no fewer than fourteen important volumes of criticism published after 1990 in which the concept of breakthrough assumes a central position, and that does not include the numerous press and journal articles on the subject; she does not hesitate to call the notion “the critical obsession of the decade” (Orska 8). Marcin Pietrzak concurs in his important text Przełom czy ciągłość: 1989 (Eng. Breakthrough or Continuity: 1989), stating that “almost

every attempt at a critical synthesis of the history of Polish literature in the last decades featured an argumentation that centred upon the year 1989” (11).

In the same article, Pietrzak suggests a model for the analysis of literary breakthroughs – a useful categorisation, which I will refer to in my brief study of post-1989 poetry in Poland. He distinguishes eight separate areas in which a breakthrough may occur:

1. political and social conditions;
2. institutional structures;
3. ideology;
4. literary consciousness and criticism;
5. subject matter;
6. style and poetics;
7. generation;
8. masterpieces.

When it comes to 1989, the occurrence of a breakthrough is unquestionable in at least several of the categories (such as the complete change of institutional structures related to the creation and publication of literature); others are more contentious, and require in-depth analysis to be verified (this includes claims of major innovations in the field of style and poetics). This division is useful because it clearly shows that determining whether a breakthrough took place or not depends largely on the perspective one adopts when looking at literature; specifically, whether one assumes “a broader communicative perspective” or focuses on “the evolution of forms” (see Pietrzak 11).

While there can be no doubt that literature found itself in a new situation post-1989, ~~but~~ opinions on whether a stylistic and ideological revolution also took place are divided. As Pietrzak puts it, “while phenomena such as the free market, the media boom, changes in cultural politics, and the much hyped – though natural - emergence of a new generation of authors – are strong arguments for the occurrence of a breakthrough in any discussion, these phenomena have little actual influence on literary practice” (15). Tomasz Cieślak strikes a similar note in his introduction to Literatura Polska 1990-2000 (eng. Polish Literature 1990-2000), stating that it is hard to formulate a simple and clear diagnosis for the period. He writes:

There can be no doubt that the functions of literature have changed in the 90's; a communicative breakthrough took place; the way culture is disseminated has changed, since the 'cultural product' has become subject to the laws of the free market and ~~the~~ advertising; old hierarchies have fallen apart, but the literature of the last decade – written by the new generation of younger authors – does not, I think, speak with its own, distinct voice. (9)

All of the above factors are a direct result of the socio-political changes in 1989. Some of them were awaited eagerly: they signalled the restitution of rights and freedoms that are considered inalienable and natural in most democracies. However, their arrival occasionally brought about consequences that even those who had fought for them found hard to accept. A good example is the issue of censorship. Pietrzak notes that “the fall of the old regime and the end of

censorship made the free expression of opinions possible, but also decreased the value of words. ... Democracy entered every sphere of social activity, [including literature]” (Pietrzak 14). Every word written for a Second Circulation publication seemed precious, if only due to the rarity of such texts; once literary texts became directly accessible, and the media began forming opinions and providing commentary, however, their value fell. Still, Jerzy Jarzębski, in the introduction to the first issue of his literary journal Teksty Drugie (en. Second Texts) wrote, from the perspective of six years of pluralism:

The disappointment of writers whose words were robbed of meaning by democracy does not worry me ... . This is a world where everyone tries to outshout the others, but at least everyone has the right to speak. ... This is a world where a word has to wrestle its own significance and worth from other words, but at least it cannot rely on other powers to lend it strength through sheer physical domination. The cacophony and idiocy of democracy are closer to my heart than the bitter wisdom of totalitarianism: they give us the chance to truly know reality. (1, 2)

Another direct result of the fall of the oppressive government was the change in the perceived role of literature. When it no longer strives to fulfil a mission, it loses its importance and its ability to shape everyday life; authors lose their social standing, as well as any rights and privileges they may have enjoyed in their days as moral leaders of the opposition. “When literature stops educating and leading its readers to the battlefield,” writes Marian Stala, “the illusion of its unity

vanishes, as does the conviction that it serves some sort of higher purpose. ... Literature has been pushed back to the margins. Few read it, and few find they need it” (282).

Poetry, then, had to adapt to its new role and new conditions. If it was to retain readers, it had to learn to cope with a free economy, and most of all, with a new, powerful force, one that would quickly usurp the poets' role as shaper of people's consciousness and consciences: the already mentioned media. Some, like critic Jacek Trznadel, saw them as a major threat: “The main problem literature faces nowadays,” he wrote in a survey conducted by the Arka magazine in 1991, “is the competition it faces from the mass-media: television, film, the press, and radio. ... We are threatened by an invasion of a world mono-culture of garbage ... ruled by the laws of the market, which always promote the worst values with the greatest common appeal” (Trznadel). While not all critics who were wary of the media adopted an equally dramatic tone, as years went by commentators such as Nowacki pointed out practices including the overuse of terms such as “artistic revelation” and the assessment of the artistic merit of a work by the profit it generates as dangerous if applied to high literature (see Nowacki).

However, other voices welcomed the free market and its new, relatively trustworthy and highly influential media as potentially positive developments. Krzysztof Varga points out that the media uproar surrounding new publications tends to irritate the older poets and critics (like Kornhauser, Miłosz, Musiał, and Trybuś)<sup>15</sup>, because they feel the hype is not proportional to the artistic value of the work. He goes on to defend the media, stating that “one cannot chastise [them] for

taking an interest in young literature, although they do have a tendency to react over-enthusiastically to various innovations. But it is thanks to their advertising campaigns that young people turn to contemporary Polish literature, and away from Ludlum and his ilk” (6).

Varga seemed to believe, then, that younger poets were able to use television and newspapers effectively as vehicles for their work. Stala, for examples, acknowledges the fact that “between 1993 and 1996, the media, and especially television, took an active part in promoting young poetry. Most observers of the literary scene assumed that new writers can make use of the power and accessibility of the medium to take over from their predecessors and settle in the spot they used to occupy in collective consciousness.” (300). However, he goes on to note that in the long term, it was television that used the young poets, surrounded the 90's debuts with hype, exaggerating their otherness and novelty to attract viewers, then promptly moved on to other subjects when the story grew old. (see 300, 301).

Apart from the fickleness of the media, poetry had to contend with the ~~necessity~~ need to promote and sell books, which came after the termination of the state monopoly on the publishing industry (for the 1<sup>st</sup> circulation) and the disappearance of a context that gave some texts the status of reactionary must-reads (for the Second Circulation).

The mechanisms of promotion and sales, rebuilt from scratch in the early 90's, gave a real meaning to the category of popularity. ... the market confirmed the position of several poets long considered

to be classics, and was (to a lesser degree) clement to a narrow group of much advertised beginners, but for the vast majority, market mechanisms simply proved the low social influence of poetry instead of showing the power of words. (Stala 299).

Stala wrote those words in 2004, hence the sense of detachment that permeates them – he was, by then, well used to the free market of literature. Most commentators in 1990, however, looked at the new market situation with fear, predicting a dramatic cheapening of the general reading public's taste due to a greedy publishing industry pandering to the lowest cravings of undiscerning customers searching for easy entertainment<sup>16</sup>.

Referring back to Pietrzak's list of potential breakthrough areas, it now seems clear that major changes occurred in the first three points: a new, democratic political system replaced the old authoritarian regime; this led to the downfall of the state-run publishing industry and the co-existing 1<sup>st</sup> and Second Circulations, which resulted in the construction of a free market, characterised by a profit-driven capitalist approach; literature lost its messianic role, making it possible for authors to pick and choose from a multitude of ideologies instead of the dual official – underground division from before 1989. Czapliński offers the following interpretation of the changes and their effect on literature:

1989 marked the end of a process which made the general public free to get involved in politics, and writers – free to discard politics. ... From this moment on, literature found an independent field ... whereupon it could focus on matters other than questions

of ideology, choose loneliness over solidarity, and address the metaphysics of private existence instead of the physics of political life. (Czapliński 171)

Having thus established how the changing circumstances have affected the production of literature and its context, I will now look at the critics' opinions concerning changes to style and poetics – in other words, try to see whether, in their opinion, the breakthrough in the first three categories, which cannot be denied, was reflected by and in innovations in the remaining fields. Perhaps unsurprisingly, reactions were divergent, as one group of critics lamented a change for the worse, another maintained no major breakthrough had taken place, and a last group did find interesting new features in young poetry, and acknowledged their presence with cautious optimism. Interestingly, several critics seem to oscillate between groups, occasionally even within one essay, as the quotations below will show.

The first of the three groups consisted of critics disappointed with the developments in poetry after 1989. Orska writes that “literary life in the 90's is nowadays frequently assessed as mediocre, characterised by a general poor taste and overwhelming sense of futility and tackiness, and lacking originality” (12). She supports her point with quotations and paraphrase from critics such as Klejnocki, Sławiński, Nowicki, and Śliwiński, who all seem to agree that new poetry can be dismissed superficial, boring, small, and irrelevant when observed several years after its production<sup>17</sup> (see 12). It would appear that the poetry produced by young poets post-1989 failed to meet the expectations of many



experts – the “new” I mentioned in the introduction to this section was not new enough to satisfactorily replace the old.

Marian Stala points out that the reaction of disappointment and disillusionment with new writing shows how “radical” those hopes were. He states clearly that “people expected a sudden disappearance of the past and crystallisation of a new poetic order. The past failed to disappear, and the order failed to crystallise” (294). In other words, in the eyes of many, the poets born in the 60's failed to discount the achievements of their predecessors by developing a style that would appear as something “innovative and necessary, dazzling and dominating” (see Stala, 293-295). The lack of a grand narrative that could provide a centre, a point of reference informing all the writing done in the country, as the opposition to the oppressive government had done before 1989, made it more difficult to rank and assess new verse<sup>18</sup>. As topics and tastes multiplied, poetry became more and more local in scope, which made it very hard to pinpoint the particular work worthy of national recognition – leaving it to the media to do the job of the critic. Instead of passionately arguing for their aesthetic and ethical programmes, various poetries started simply co-existing in relative indifference. And so critics who expected a new Miłosz or Herbert found that post-1989 poetry “is losing more than it is gaining ... Poetry is only revitalised by contributions from older authors ... New poetry has given over the task of serious political commentary to cabarets and urban folklore.” (Balcerzan).

This last quotation shows that among those inclined to perceive the breakthrough in negative terms, poetry's power to influence people in the social

and political spheres was still an important criterion for its assessment. This approach also explains accusations of “smallness” and “irrelevance” mentioned in the paragraph above. Consequently, it seems reasonable to assume that a sweeping rejection and ridicule of post-1989 poetry may stem from difficulties with accepting the new position of literature in a democratic society. “The idea of the '89 breakthrough,” writes Orska, “now serves as a pretext for extremely harsh criticism of the form and content of new literature, usually produced by older literary scholars disappointed with the texts created in a 'free' Poland” (11).

Another attitude is to reject the concept of breakthrough altogether. This can be done for two reasons: one is a belief that as a tool for the analysis of literature and literary history, the idea of breakthrough is outdated and no longer applicable to the new, democratic Poland, as is the very concept of a literary generation united by a common artistic manifesto that is so necessary for the framework to function. The other is based in close reading: it looks at the poetics of young Polish poetry and rejects the idea of a breakthrough, finding more evidence for a slow, persistent progression or even the repetition of well-known patterns<sup>19</sup>. In an interview with Maciej Nowicki, Janusz Sławiński stated explicitly that “the 1989 breakthrough, so crucial in the history of Poland in the twentieth century, was barely reflected in literature, both in the sense that it has not been represented by authors in a believable manner and that no new forms, subjects and creative idioms followed it.” (quoted in Orska, 19).

This categorical judgment reflects the inefficiency of older theoretical frameworks when applied to modern Polish poetry: the ability to talk about a

major poetic breakthrough depends heavily on a clear ideological agenda and aesthetic programme formulated by a young generation with a sense of unity. Meanwhile, when poets born in the 60's and later did gather, they focused mostly around magazines and journals (Brulion, Nowy Nurt, Czas Kultury) instead of forming literary groups and movements with their own distinct manifestos as their older colleagues were wont to do. In fact, the new authors were careful to retain their image as individuals and avoid making common proclamations concerning literary matters. Orska emphatically states that she has “never heard a poet from that period declare his intention to innovate, let alone express his yearning to elaborate a universal, dominating poetic idiom.” (17) Most of the talk about the “new” in poetry came from critics, in the form of wishful thinking. I will show later that despite Sławiński's categorical dismissal of the poetry of the 90's, an evolution in most of the areas he listed (subject matter, form, style) did occur. However, it did not manifest itself as it did in previous decades, which was enough for critics sharing his outlook to assume no development was taking place.

The other reason I listed for discarding the term [? concept] of breakthrough altogether was the fact that all the changes that were occurring were gradual, and could easily be traced back to traditions from the past. Pietrzak argues that “the most you could say is that literature became independent and so could be discussed in purely aesthetic terms; any changes have therefore taken place at the meta-literary level (discussions, criticism). The continuity [of literary evolution] has not been broken at any point.” (20). Jacek Gutorow concurs when he says that “even the revolutionary spirit that currently pervades Polish poetry

cannot negate Tradition; in fact, it is merely its extension” (*Poezja i tradycja*). I will discuss the idea of the continuation of the romantic tradition by Polish poets in the 90's in the next section of this chapter, devoted to the *Brulion* poets, perhaps the most important and representative group of the period; for now, I will just add that even Klejnocki and Sosnowski, in a book which supports the idea of a 1989 breakthrough, admit that “while they decided to forgo the old vision of Polish culture, the *Brulion* poets only introduced minimal changes to the poetic forms they had inherited” (37).

There are those, however, who see the changes as more than minimal. Gutorow, for example, contends that “the 90's have brought with them radical changes in the lyrical language” (*Niepodległość*, 9), an opinion he holds despite his belief in the lack of breakthrough defined in terms of traditions and sweeping literary visions. He does not try to generalise the changes: instead, he continues his book by engaging in detailed analyses of particular poets, or even isolated texts. His is a collection of essays that Orska singles out as the “only volume analysing the poetry produced in the last decade which refuses to give in to the rhetoric of the breakthrough and eschews literary-historical approaches in general” (*Niepodległość*, 8). The origin of this approach may lie in Gutorow's brand of criticism, which focuses more on the poems themselves, their structure and their contents, instead of following the 80's tradition of looking at their social and political function, or their capacity for moral guidance.

A shift of emphasis from the socio-political aspects of literature to issues pertaining to language, style, form and content reveals the changes that did take

place after 1989 in Polish poetry. Orska notes that “from the point of view of poetry, the crucial element was the broadening of the range of available topics and forms. As they were no longer determined by ideology and social life, a new creative field became accessible” (25). Poets were suddenly free to choose subjects and modes of expression in a reality which did not automatically classify them as ethically right or wrong – which did not, in fact, apply moral or political categories to poetry at all. And so “authors stopped writing about the ways things should be and focused instead on the way things are. They turned to their own biographies, bodies, and surroundings” (Pietrzak, 18).

Orska sums up the consequences of this turn to the private as follows:

The poetry of the last decade ... employs a rhetoric that follows the laws of narration; it does not strive for the universality and unity of meanings of the Polish high modernist twentieth century poetry. ... In the 90's, a new style of lyrical expression appeared in Poland. ... The poems I refer to often follow the pattern of casual conversation, and employ the poetics of everyday, offhand notes; the fact that poets in the late 80's and early 90's used the idiom of informal communication cannot be questioned (30).

In essence, poets from that period decided to reject both idioms that had dominated the literary scene before their time: “the ideological and authoritative official discourse and its opposite, the language of the anti-communist opposition, closely connected to traditional cultural and moral values.” This gave rise to the term “Third Circulation,” used by some critics to designate writers who refused to

conform to the poetics of witness, ignored the decay and fall of the communist government as a literary subject, and dispensed with the traditional duties of poets, such as serving their country and tending to the ethics of their compatriots. Stabro sees the belated arrival of post-modernism on the Polish literary scene as the event that made it possible for younger authors to find alternatives to the two options mentioned above, and quotes Krzysztof Koehler, possibly the most influential critic from the younger generation, who joyfully announced the fact that finally, a group of poets had appeared who “cannot really be bothered with the ethos of duty and service, fascinated as they are with vitality, freedom, unfettered expressiveness and authenticity of experience” (see *Literatura polska* 146-147).  
[underline or italicise title]

Koehler’s words of welcome quoted above were published in Brulion.  
[underline or italicise title – here and with other occurrences – use Search and Replace] A magazine that began functioning in the Second Circulation, but really made its mark at the beginning of the 90's. Just as “Nowa Fala” illustrated the situation on the Polish literary scene in the early 80's, Brulion can be used to observe the poetry that really followed the breakthrough of 1989.

#### 4. THE BRULION PHENOMENON

According to critics Sosnowski and Klejnocki , the Brulion magazine occupies a special place on the map of Polish literature in the 90's. During the first half of the decade, when it enjoyed its greatest popularity, it showcased many of the trends and tendencies characteristic for new verse, and is now unanimously

recognised as one of the most influential literary publications in the country, to the point where it is often singled out as the symbol of the generations of authors born in the 60's – although, as I will show later, many take issue with that. “Brulion is definitely more than just a magazine or a community,” write the authors of Chwilowe zawieszenie broni (eng. A Temporary Truce) in their monograph devoted to the quarterly and its authors (6). Even when if one were to take their remark literally, it seems there can be little doubt as to its accuracy: the magazine itself gave rise to “four important series of poetry books ... , a number group appearances such as the Brulion-Bulion festival in 1992, the ‘Alternativi’ and ‘Lalamido’ television programmes, and the ‘Ultrafiolet’ radio show” (Wieczorek 29) Sosnowski and Klejnocki are firmly convinced that the writings of poets born in the 60's and early 70's exhibit common features which set them apart as group, features best exemplified by the contents of the magazine, and best contextualised through the impact it had and the reactions it elicited. They seem uncertain, however, whether one should go so far as to call all poets who made their debuts in the late 80's and early 90's the “Brulion generation,” and seem to worry that is might constitute a misuse of the term (see Klejnocki and Sosnowski 6-11). Stanislaw Stabro has no such qualms. In his chapter devoted to Polish poetry in the 90's, he states without hesitation that poets born between 1960 and 1970 should be collectively known as the “Pokolenie Brulionu” (eng. “The Brulion Generation”) (Literatura polska, 146).

The first issues of Brulion appeared in 1987; however, in its early days, the magazine was a relatively tame publication. By this I mean that it failed

to challenge the standards of the Polish literary scene of the day: the magazine was published in the Second Circulation, and its first few issues seemed to leave no doubt as to its dedication to ideals already familiar to its target readers, fully conforming, in its first eight issues, to their definitions of high culture. The new magazine tried to attract readers by featuring contributors whose names were well known to all those who followed literary debates in the past twenty years or so: Artur Międzyrzecki, Tadeusz Nyczek, Wiktor Woroszyński, Jarosław Rymkiewicz were among some of the authors whose texts were solicited by Robert Tekieli, the editor-in-chief. In fact, Klejnocki and Sosnowski point out that paradoxically, more new names could be found in the official, government-funded “Okolice,” a 1<sup>st</sup> circulation magazine that printed texts by many authors who were to gain considerable prominence in the 90's, including Darek Foks, Krzysztof Śliwka, Olga Tokarczuk, and even Jacek Podsiadło, even though the latter was later to be counted among the most important authors associated with Brulion (Klejnocki & Sosnowski, 6-7).

The magazine's ninth issue, published in Krakow in the winter of 1989, was the first to display the features that were later to be associated with the title in popular (and, in many cases, critical) consciousness. It contained a number of highly provocative texts, both by Polish authors and in translation, including excerpts from the works of Georges Bataille, Georges Lévy, the Marquis de Sade and others, which shocked readers and critics profoundly. Marcin Wieczorek, author of another volume devoted in its entirety to the study of Brulion's history and impact, sees this scandal-mongering as a reflection of a wider socio-cultural



phenomenon. He writes that “the need for discussion, for breaking taboos, for exposing mistaken stereotypes and for intellectual openness was prevalent in 1989, especially among the younger members of the intelligentsia (Wieczorek 12).

However, in the eyes of many readers and critics (especially those from generations older than that of its editors) the quarterly had broken the accepted norms of expression for a new generation, and the texts it published were too shocking, too distasteful, or too carefree to be discussed seriously by prominent members of the literary community. Crucially, Brulion also broke one of the basic premises of the Second Circulation: instead of printing those poems and texts that would be blocked by state censorship due to their political stance, Tekieli and his aides selected texts which were, in their opinion, artistically innovative as well as socially and politically controversial. (see Wieczorek 13-14). Graffiti, pornography, revisionist history and poems eschewing the high style in favour of the colloquial all made their way onto the quarterly’s pages.

Consequently, many authors who made their names in the 80's decided to refrain from publishing in Brulion, although selected texts by writers and poets whose status within the Second Circulation was uncontested did occasionally appear, even after the 9<sup>th</sup> issue. However, it was the rapidly expanding section devoted to new writing that came to be seen as one of the most important features of the magazine: Tekieli saw in the work of authors such as Marcin Baran, Miłosz Biedrzycki, Marzena Broda, Piotr Czajkowski, Paweł Filas, Natasza Goerke, Manuela Gretkowska, Krzysztof Jaworski, Krzysztof Koehler, Zbigniew Machej, Cezary Michalski, Jacek Podsiadło, Marcin Sendecki, Artur

Szlosarek, Paweł Szwed, Marcin Świetlicki, Olga Tokarczuk, and Grzegorz Wróblewski a great potential for opening new perspectives for Polish literature in general and poetry in particular (see Wieczorek 14-16). Reactions were mixed, of course, but as the provocative image refused to fade, and scandal followed scandal, some influential critics did voice their approval. The newspaper article below, written in 1992 by Maria Janion, an influential figure in the field of Polish literary studies, is a representative example:

Brulion and 'Czas Kultury' both attack the lofty gesture defending the 'world of basic moral values,' so characteristic for the uncritical monopolists of high culture; they both point out that the 'multi-faceted collective organism of European culture' is far from uniform, and that while a study of morality is indeed necessary, alternative sources of inspiration have to be found. Brulion has the ambition to create a new model of an intellectual magazine, and its attempt to present certain cultural phenomena in their entirety is much more than mere blasphemy. (Janion)

Most of those who lavished praise on the magazine agreed that it was high time that someone abandoned the pathos and martyrdom that had been such prominent features of Polish poetry in past years<sup>20</sup>.

Rejecting the idioms typical for both the First and the Second Circulation had the effect of exacerbating expectations of a breakthrough. Enthusiasts looked to Brulion to provide a new artistic programme for the new age, and a poet – or poets – to match. As stated in the previous section, such an expectation was quite

natural, as every major political change in Poland brought about a new crop of poetic talent, which meant that in popular consciousness, a clear connection had been established between political change and poetry (see Wieczorek 16).

As a result, when Marcin Świetlicki, a poet closely associated with the magazine, was awarded the Grand Prix in the “Brulion poetycki” competition in 1990, it appeared that the expectations outlined above would be fulfilled. The jury members were Wisława Szymborska, Marian Stala and Jarosław Rymkiewicz, three towering figures in Second Circulation circles: it seemed that Tekieli had found a poet who could not only help sell his publication, but also act as a figurehead for a new generation of authors whom he would lead to the expected breakthrough within a poetics acceptable to their predecessors (Wieczorek, 17). Also expected to show a new path for Polish poetry was another Brulion author: Jacek Podsiadło. He was introduced in the magazine by Krzysztof Koehler as one who opened himself to western influences and as such could breathe new life into Polish poetry, just as – according to the critic – the poets from the “Skamander” group had done in 1918, after reading Walt Whitman (see Koehler, 26).

Writing almost fifteen years after their Brulion debuts, Stabro reaffirms Koehler’s early judgment: he sees Świetlicki and Podsiadło as the two most interesting authors of the time. Both sought inspiration in American poetry (especially Frank O’Hara and other New York poets) and were open about their interest in popular culture, rock and roll, zines, and other manifestations of alternative culture. Their own verse was written in highly colloquial language, and rejected the styles and forms of high culture; neither was there any room for a

metaphysical and ethical programme in the manner of Herbert or Krynicki. (Literatura polska, 149). Meanwhile, Robert Tekieli, who was an active poet apart from his role as editor of Brulion, developed a style that involved more than just questioning cultural norms: his brand of poetry attempted to subvert language and meaning through ascetic, multi-layered word games, operating “on the border between language and an embarrassed silence” (Gutorow, Niepodległość, 225-228) These considerable changes in poetic diction were pounced upon by critics and readers impatient for a major breakthrough, and led to the introduction of the critical term “Barbarians”, used to differentiate poets belonging to the Brulion generations from the more traditional “Classicists,” following in the footsteps of Miłosz, Herbert, and the other greats of older days.

This bi-polar division originated in the fact that many critics and poets were wary of the innovations and scandals of the Brulion milieu, and blamed them for resorting to shock tactics and provocation without producing quality poetry. Julian Kornhauser, a poet and critic from the older generation, did not hide his disillusionment with the newcomers: in his 1995 article from the important weekly Tygodnik Powszechny, he accuses the Brulion poets of rejecting everything that came before them without offering anything in return. In what constitutes a telling illustration of the consequences of applying criteria from the late 70's and early 80's to literature written after the fall of communism, he complains:

The young did not want to celebrate the fall of the Berlin wall with new social ideas. It was enough for them to reject the world of politics, which – according to them – meant discarding the literary

model that dominated the past twenty years ... Old inhibitions are gone: everything that was forbidden before is now up for sale. The answer to the surrounding chaos was more chaos. A violent assault has been mounted against old, humanist values which used to be a source of inspiration for art. What did we get in return? ... In poetry, egocentric musings about the authors' isolation.

(Kornhauser)

Another point frequently criticised by their opponents was the Brulion poets' aptitude at self-promotion (already hinted at in Kornhauser's "everything is up for sale" above). Faced with an entirely new market reality, where old distribution channels stopped functioning and poetry turned into a product like any other, they were the first generation to effectively use marketing strategies and the mass-media for promoting their work. "Readers vote with their money now", said Tekieli in an interview in 1991 (qtd. in Klejnocki and Sosnowski 37) – this was a realistic approach, and the fact that Brulion authors found new ways of writing for a free economy helped them establish their presence on the market, which in turn led to securing government grants, publishing deals, newspaper interviews, etc. Interestingly, the Brulion authors and accompanying critics found one of the best ways of advertising is to pander to the general expectations for the "new". However, their "new" was either scandalous and taboo-breaking or introverted and highly personal, in accordance with the style shift described in the "Breakthrough" section of this chapter. As a consequence, those used to thinking of poetry in ways in keeping with the traditional popular Polish view – as a high art, a repository of

truth, a source of moral guidance reborn with every major change in the country – could not accept the new order whose coming they were awaiting with such eagerness, and accused the Brulion poets of cynical self-aggrandising<sup>21</sup>.

However, perhaps the most intriguing issue raised by literary critics is rather less obvious (and does not simply stem from the resentment an older author may feel when seeing younger successors steal the limelight, as Klejnocki and Sosnowski suggested was the case with Kornhauser and others (see Klejnocki and Sosnowski, p. 36). Gutorow notes that while numerous voices were quick to accuse Brulion authors of superficiality and expendability, only a very few critics were able to recognise the actions of the poets for what he thinks they were: a repetition of gestures well-known from the past, a re-creation of the romantic paradigm calling for a break with tradition and the obliteration of the old order of things (Niepodległość, 224). Maria Janion's vision of their poetry is similar: "romantic culture is ending, but young people who build islands of alternative culture and try to shatter the remaining romantic fossils take upon them the risk that goes with voicing one's own views and destroying the institutional canon – a romantic gesture par excellence. Such is the case, for example, with the "Brulion" magazine in Krakow" (Janion and Krzemiński).

The anthology of work by authors associated with Brulion, "Macie swoich poetów" (roughly translatable as "Here Are Your Poets") provides an apt illustration of both the ideas of some of the most active members of the newer generations and the critical reaction to their stance. In the introduction to their 1996 work, editors Pawel Dunin-Wasowicz, Jaroslaw Klejnocki and Krzysztof

Varga claim not to have had any particular agenda. They write: “we want to stress that we have no ambitions to create new hierarchies, provoke discussions or predict dramatic changes in values. We want our book to simply act as a record of the work of poets born after 1960 (Dunin-Wasowicz, Klejnocki, Varga, 3). They make no attempt at identifying groups or trends, choosing instead to simply note the huge diversity of available styles, from post-modern games and parodies to new classicism. As is common among editors of contemporary verse anthologies, they readily admit that no guarantee is offered as to which poems and poets will really make their mark on Polish literary history, and offer their collection as raw material to be dissected, analysed, and judged by future researchers.

The ideas quoted above come from the book’s first edition. Interestingly, the second printing (dating from 1997) features a new addition: excerpts from several strongly negative reviews of the book’s first iteration, with critics finding fault both with the quality of the poetry and the lack of value judgment, which was perceived by some as a refusal to shoulder an anthologist’s responsibility. There follows a vitriolic retort from the editors, who blame the critics’ strong reactions on an inability to understand the new reality of Polish literature.

Contemporary poets write in many different ways. This is not enough for some. Critics both young and old decry the fact that we do not offer the Polish reader a Potemkin image of a model village of verse – an enhanced picture filled with flashes of brilliance. They perceive inclusion in an anthology as a special honour. We find this amusing. Times have changed. No-one gave us special permission

to publish this book. Everyone is free to make their own, according to their own taste. ... We had no intention to create a list of local nobility or a record of local peasantry; we just wanted a catalogue for this huge supermarket, where everyone can come and choose the goods they want. After all, some like fine wines, some prefer moonshine. (Dunin-Wasowicz, Klejnocki, Varga, 7)

This emotionally charged response provides a clear image of the approach to poetry prevalent among many of the younger poets: a free-for-all field with room for countless forms of individual expression, far removed from the manifesto-toting groups of communist Poland. The supermarket metaphor is symptomatic: poetry has become a commodity to be sampled at the readers' leisure, stripped of the shroud of mysticism and the burden of duty that characterised before.

But while those used to a more hallowed idea of poetry may have balked at the Brulion generation's laissez-faire attitude towards literature, it only took a few years for their approach to spread, even amongst representatives of older generations. The first of the two most important anthologies of the late 90s and the first years of the new millennium is Współcześni poeci polscy by Krzysztof Karasek, whom I have listed earlier as one of the most important members of Nowa Fala. The book's goal, as stated by the editor, was to present Polish poetry from 1956 onwards, an audacious decision which excludes a number of authors already considered canonical<sup>22</sup>. Like many critics of his generation, Karasek sees parallels between "explosions of freedom" and "explosions of imagination", with



the social unrest of the 60s, the national movements of the 70s, and the oppression of the 80s all resulting in altered poetics and new visions of poetry (see Współcześni poeci polscy, Karasek, 11). As for the latest political and social sea-change, i.e. the events of 1989, his position is that it has not had a similarly wide-ranging impact on the literary scene, shattering it instead into a myriad disparate and independent voices. Karasek believes that the only way in which the advent of democracy has influenced contemporary poets as a group is a narrowing of scope, a growing concern with the personal. While he is wary of predicting a new direction for what has become a varied and fragmented scene, he does hazard a guess based on this very observation.

Discovering one's roots might be the main direction for the poetic onslaught of the next decade; that and giving witness to values which were so far relegated to the peripheries of culture, outside of the mainstream, off the beaten track . Discovering oneself and the world – through the prism of one's self, i.e. the small universe from which one hails, be it a region, a town, a social or ethnic group ... This method of augmenting one's imagination, true to the spirit of the times, could be an asset within the developing, multilingual and many-voiced European literature: a Polish community speaking in multiple voices, exhibiting varied cultural influences. (Współcześni poeci polscy, Karasek, 11-12)

Karasek's book is complemented by another important collection: Antologia nowej poezji polskiej: 1990-2000, edited by the much younger poets

Roman Honet and Mariusz Czyżowski<sup>23</sup>. The anthologists' stated goal is similar, if limited to a shorter timescale: to create an accurate and complete record of Polish poetry in the decade following the fall of communism. However, they go even further than Karasek in their reluctance to make any sort of general comments on new poetic trends. In a departure from the 80s traditions of literary criticism, no attempt is made to define movements, or even to identify certain approaches or voices as optimal strategies to engage with the changes in Polish reality. In their place, there is a growing consciousness of the kaleidoscopic variety of styles emerging on the literary scene. In fact, the book features texts from one hundred and fourteen authors young and new, and the editors admit readily that the very size of their selection proves conclusively that not all of the authors are likely to be taught in schools to future generations (see Czyżewski and Honet, 5-6) .

We believe that the selection of poems we have made constitutes an honest and accurate representation of the newest Polish poetry, a representation which takes into account the many and varied poetics present in our chosen period, documenting their diversity while remaining aware that not everything constituting literature at a given moment is destined to eventually become part of its enduring history. (Czyżewski and Honet, 7)

And so, by assuming the role of archivists, rather than critics, Honet and Czyżowski display a marked unwillingness to pass judgment, or even to define such notions as objectivity or literary value. Instead, they seem to echo the editors

of Macie swoich poetów as they state that anthologists working with contemporary Polish poetry should limit themselves to holding up a mirror to reality, and not “do the critics’ job for them” (Czyżewski and Honet, 7).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Polish poetry has had to adapt to a major reality change in the twenty years from 1980 to 2000, and it continues to evolve. Its position shifted from that of a weapon in the fight against an oppressive regime to that of an individualised art form that matters only insofar as it can interest readers in its aesthetics. However, Polish poets have produced wildly different types of texts working within both contexts, which in turn have provoked varying reactions from critics. Even within official groupings such as Nowa Fala or Brulion, individual differences between authors make any sweeping generalisation highly risky. The consensus seems to be that even if a real change of poetics can be seen to have followed political upheavals, it is not a dramatic alteration of quality, but rather a slow shift towards private and personal subject matters and colloquial idioms, occasionally under the influence of western poetry.

### **CHAPTER 3: THE IMAGE OF POLISH POETRY IN ANGLOPHONE PRINT MEDIA**

This chapter focuses on the evolution of the image of Polish poetry in English-language print sources, in an attempt to provide material for comparison and contrast with the historical overview from the Polish perspective described in Chapter 2. Combined, these two chapters will provide the background information necessary for a thorough analysis of anthologies, by establishing the possible motives and impact stemming from the selection of specific poets, poems, styles of presentation, etc. In addition, as far as I have been able to establish, no bibliographical reference exists for articles mentioning Polish poetry in English, and I hope my research can be a stepping stone towards the creation of a valuable resource for researchers and students alike.

My sources fall into three categories. First, I have sought out books published within the period of study, be they monographs or collections of papers, and I have selected those fragments and essays that were illustrative of general trends and relevant to the subject. In the majority of cases, I have ignored books devoted to individual poets, in favour of those that adopt a wider perspective on Polish poetry. Second, I have conducted a similar review of academic journals, using the same criteria of pertinence and representativeness. And third, in an attempt to determine what image of poetry from Poland may have been entertained by non-specialist audiences, I have conducted a survey of major American and British newspapers, in search of articles referencing Polish poetry.

I have tried to emphasise the many differences, and occasional similarities, between the popular press and academic publications, as I believe the tension between those two categories can explain choices made by some of the anthologists that I will examine in Chapter 4. Accordingly, and in contrast the Chapter 2, this Chapter is organised by topic, rather than chronologically. Such a structure has the benefit of making it easier to address overarching themes and ostensibly mutually exclusive motifs that have co-existed over time, even as the political and cultural situation in Poland evolved and put their practicality to test. The reader will thus find four main sections in this chapter. The first one focuses on the perceived impact of history on Polish poetry; the second contains an analysis of the functions of Polish poetry identified by English-speaking writers; the third collects their comments on common themes, stylistic features, and translation-related issues; and the last describes the reception reserved for Polish poetry and its role on the British and American literary scenes.

## **1. THE IMPACT OF HISTORY**

### **1.1 An Inevitably Engaged Poetry**

By the beginning of the 80s, the pivotal role Poland's tumultuous history played in the development of its poetry was considered an undeniable fact by most journalists. In fact, the tone had been set long before then, and at the beginning of the studied period, press articles that did not allude to the ordeal of the Polish nation as a defining, formative experience for its artists were rare indeed. An accurate representation of the prevailing attitude at the beginning of the decade can be found in a New York Times piece, from 1980, commenting on Czesław

Miłosz's 1980 Nobel prize, wherein Poland is described as "a nation whose very borders have shifted with the course of history ... Polish literature has been crucial in preserving its culture and history, even its very language. For Polish writers, history is a collective trauma" (James A10). The image of Poland as a country where literature in general, and poetry in particular, traditionally served as a means to resist oppression, recurred in various forms throughout the whole period studied; and although the term "trauma" bears negative connotations, the most common approach was to portray Polish history as the deciding factor that shaped the country's cultural identity.

Due to the prevalence of this image, sweeping statements about the history of the country as a whole abounded. A case in point: the 1983 study of current affairs in Poland by Roland Sukenick, conducted for the New York Times, presents Poland's literary history as an uninterrupted stream of writing from the position of the oppressed by briefly referencing the exiled romantics and declaring the preceding centuries to have been no different:

Poland is no stranger to literary resistance. In a country repeatedly overrun from east and west, writers developed ways of maintaining national solidarity. In the mid-19th century almost all artistic life was carried on abroad in Paris. Now underground books are produced in Paris and London as well as in Poland, and many Polish writers live abroad. "I have more friends abroad than in Poland," the novelist Andrzej Braun, a vice president of the Writers Union, told me. "It is the destiny of Polish writers," a poet

observed, "not to publish or to publish for 100 people. The situation is no different now from the last 300 years." (A9)

Two years later, Michael T. Kaufman, the chief of the New York Times' Warsaw office, also made use of the past to explain the present, but the cynicism of Braun's observation about the limited readership of Polish poets is, in his text, replaced by a more romantic vision of literature saving the nation from obliteration, coming from poet and ex-detainee Marek Nowakowski. Kaufman reiterates the Pole's opinion, stating that the ease with which anti-establishment culture developed in the country "had something to do with Poland's tradition of conspiratorial nationalist literature going back to the period of partition when Poland disappeared as a state and was sustained as an idea by poetry." ("Knock on the Door", Kaufman A2) The Boston Globe's Louise Lief strikes a similar note in her article about the growth of Polish underground culture in the mid-80s, referring back to the partitioning of the country in a far-reaching historical retrospective, and portraying covert literary activism as a national tradition.

For Poles, the urge to speak freely is irresistible ... Poland's clandestine theaters are a historical tradition. For centuries, the theaters have reflected the country's unhappy history. Since the eighteenth century, when Poland was partitioned and annexed by Russia, Prussia, and Austria, Poles have learned to play games with the censor. ... Poland's fiercely patriotic romantic poets of the nineteenth century also joined the theatrical tradition. Adam

Mickiewicz and Zygmunt Krasinski took refuge in Paris and wrote against the foreign occupiers, calling for independence. (1)

Academic sources struck a similar note. To give one brief example: Henry Gifford, Professor of English and poet, gave a series of lectures at Cambridge University concerning the place of poetry in the reality of the 80s. He remarked that the dire circumstances call for an art that can intercede in favour of increasingly alienated people. Gifford notes that: “Miłosz observes, ‘when an entire community is struck by misfortune’ – and he instances the Nazi occupation of Poland – that ‘poetry becomes as essential as bread.’” He goes on to express his conviction that the importance of poetry in a community can be directly correlated with the oppression it has to suffer. “In a divided world,” Gifford argues, “with mounting antagonisms and the decay of mutual understanding, the good faith of poetry is indispensable. On the reliability of its witness we have to depend for communication with the past and service to the future” (24). Again, he singles out Poland as the country which, due to its history of warfare, could set the example for the rest of the world.

The peculiar circumstances of Polish history – the fact that for more than a century their native land had disappeared from the map, to be absorbed into Russia, Austria and Prussia – did not prevent Polish poets from forming a community of hope in the resurrection of Poland. Rather, it made this resource all the more necessary (Gifford 69).



## 1.2. An Inherently Poetic Nature

Another perspective on Polish poetry and its mission could be found in newspapers at the same time, one that took the reasoning further and made a bolder assumption: namely, that resistance via literature should be accepted as something inherent to an ineffable Polish nature. Its proponents viewed engaged poetry as an innate, vital part of what constitutes the nation's character. Perhaps due to its rather esoteric premise, this hypothesis was not represented in academic publications. The press, however, repeatedly painted poetic activism as more than just the logical result of centuries of oppression, turning it instead into an inherited trait of the Polish nation and one of the defining qualities of Polishness.

A 1981 Boston Globe piece quotes Miroslaw Chojecki, head of the NOWA underground press, as he answers the reporter's question about his reasons for persisting in the face of severe governmental repressions: "When pressed further, he reached into history and cited the stubborn and unending Polish resistance to repression. "For Poles," he said, "opposition is a natural way of life." (Dumanoski, "For Poles" 1) In his 1984 review of Timothy Garton Ash's Understanding and Misunderstanding Poland, Pulitzer-prize winner John Darnton paraphrases the book's point about the impact of Solidarity, which at the time of writing seemed to have been successfully repressed by the government:

Huge changes that were wrought were 'changes in the realm of consciousness rather than being.' ... the consciousness exists as a well-defined, codified entity to be passed along and to reassert itself once again, probably in the not-too-distant future. Mr. Ash

does not pursue the point, but this consciousness is analogous to Polish nationhood, which was kept alive during the 123 years of partition by futile rebellions, Romantic poetry and Chopin's music.  
(A.9)

Poetry and music thus fall in the same category as armed rebellion in the struggle for the preservation of Polish consciousness and nationhood, and the notion is given substance through the double patronage of the renowned historian and the prize-winning journalist, thus reinforcing the conviction that the propensity towards employing literature as a weapon against oppressors runs in the blood of every true Pole. This, of course, reflects on depictions of individual poets, and it becomes nearly impossible to mention an author without stressing his credentials as a freedom fighter. Mickiewicz is not simply introduced as a poet, but a “poet-activist” (Dumanoski, “For Poles” 1); Miłosz’s writing during the Second World War is portrayed as part of the activities of the resistance (“The Poet”, Hoffman A.29); and Herbert is presented as a fitting heir to the great Polish bards of yore (next to political activist Adam Michnik) due to his focus themes such as “freedom, destiny, Nation, hope and redemption” (“Polish Writers”, Kaufman A.1). It should be noted that a closer reading of Herbert’s poetry makes this reductive analysis of his chosen themes questionable.

It seemed that the romantic grand narrative of Polish poetry as an art destined to always lead the nation that creates it towards freedom from an ever-changing array of oppressors would be put to the test after the change of regime at the end of the 80s removed the last remnants of the totalitarian government and

turned Poland into a democracy. Indeed, there was some doubt concerning the continued ability of poetry to function as a political force, and I will discuss it in the next section of this chapter; however, the general conviction that Polish history remains the overarching theme of poetry and determines the poets' importance on the cultural landscape remained, to surprising degree, unaffected by the major upheavals of 1989 and 1990.

To give some representative examples: even four years after ~~the~~ Lech Wałęsa took office as the first democratically elected president of the Polish Republic, attitudes among Western journalists continued largely unchanged: Dan Cryer, reviewing Miłosz's Year of the Hunter for the Baltimore Sun in 1994, stated that it exemplified "the truism that in Polish letters it is impossible to separate the spheres of politics, religion and literature." (6.D) Another six years after that, a Chicago Tribune article on Zagajewski opened with the following paragraph:

Poland is perhaps the most devastated country of modern Europe, victimized and dominated time and again by the bellicose nations that surround it and by the interchangeably bleak ideologies of Czarism, Nazism and Stalinism. And yet, within this unremittingly oppressive climate, Polish literature has flourished, especially poetry. Poland can claim two Nobel laureates in verse, Czesław Miłosz and Wisława Szymborska, and several other modern poets of equal stature, most notably Zbigniew Herbert and Tadeusz Rosewicz (sic). (Wojahn 14)

In other words, the tone had not altered much, and the use of the present tense in the opening sentence could easily encourage less attentive readers to assume that Poland still suffers under the tyranny of one invader or another. Things were not much different in Europe: in 2003, Barry Keane published an article in the Irish Times arguing that Poland and Ireland enjoy a special “empathy” due to their shared histories of oppression and rebellion. He did admit that “Polish poetry is often victimised by clichés,” but then went on to argue that “while many poets’ reputations have been destroyed for posterity by affiliation to one political outlook or another ... it is precisely this state of affairs that makes Polish poetry so fascinating” (33).

One year later, as Poland and other new member states joined the European Union, The Guardian conducted a review of their literatures. The entry on Poland read thus: “No strangers to Europe's 20th-century complex of wars and atrocities, Poland faced trauma so regularly that its writers were among Europe's earliest avant-garde: traditional narrative failed, because life was no longer linear.” (Evans 36) In other words, the author perpetuates the idea that the popularity of Polish writing can be explained by means of a simple equation: a history of violence makes for great literature. This sentiment is echoed in the popular press all the way to the present day, as exemplified by this last excerpt, which appeared in 2007 in a Canadian broadsheet: “Invasions, world wars, repressive regimes: With such a turbulent history, is it any wonder Poland produced several renowned poets?” (Sherman WP.15)

## 2. THE FUNCTION OF POETRY

### 2.1. Poets in Action

For popular media, the most interesting aspect of the situation of Polish poetry was by far its direct involvement with dissident activities, and the consequent repressions that poets and readers alike had to endure. This blurring of boundaries between the political and the aesthetic, between art and real life, was perceived as exotic from a Western vantage point, and was therefore a motif present in the vast majority of newspaper articles about the country as such, not only those which specifically focused on literature.

One recurring theme that contributed to the blurring of the distinction between poets and activists was the subject of the repressions both groups faced from the powers that be. In 1981, visiting American poet Robert Pinsky wrote of the necessity for authors to assume false identities, in an attempt to escape police action – a stratagem employed earlier by members of resistance battle groups: “[The intellectuals and writers I meet] were ... removed from jobs, or from influence, prevented from above-ground publication, limited to pseudonyms.” (A.3) The introduction of Martial Law, with its very real consequences for writers, led to a number of texts observing that poets and writers seemed to have been designated as a target group of special importance by the military government. The following 1983 report on an intensification of punitive action directed against this very group is a good illustration:

Despite public hints that martial law restrictions may soon be lifted after the visit of Pope John Paul II, the Polish authorities are

continuing, and in some ways intensifying, a crackdown on dissent. The major targets of the campaign are intellectuals, writers and artists, largely supportive of the banned Solidarity union, who have steadfastly refused to give allegiance to the Government of Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski. Polish intellectuals were taken aback by two recent articles in the Communist Party daily newspaper, Trybuna Ludu, which attacked virtually every important living Polish writer by name. "Anyone who escaped mention is very upset, of course," a Polish journalist said, "because everyone else will think less of him." (Kifner 13)

Journalists also noted that the persecutions were not only directed at those who wrote; simply being in the possession of a forbidden text was tantamount to an act of rebellion, and anyone found transporting underground literature was treated as a serious threat to the system. In 1982, the Boston Globe published an article sent in by two anonymous writers, who, as the subtitle explained, "sent dispatches to the Globe for publication this week on condition that their names not be revealed":

All cases of possessing "illegal" publications are now reviewed by military courts. The sentences are three to five years, handed out with mechanical regularity as though from an assembly line. ...

Last week somebody gave a young woman who was never involved in politics a text of a satirical poem depicting the military rulers. The "internists" rang her bell at 7 a.m. Oh, yes, she got the

poem from a taxi driver who saw that she was depressed and wanted to cheer her up. She stuck to her story during three days of interrogation. Before being put in a cell she was thoroughly searched - including gynaecologically. At the end she was asked to work as a police informer. Even though she refused, the police released her, threatening that she will be fired from her job. She came out a different person; instead of the easygoing girl she had been, she became a personification of the hatred of the authorities, ready to take a razor blade and start cutting throats. ("Letters from Poland", p. 4)

Shocking stories such as the above contributed to the conviction that poetry occupies, in Polish society, a position so special that the usually passive act of reading is perceived by officials as an act of rebellion. This view did not end with the lifting of Martial Law. In 1984, for example, the New York Times printed the story of Jan Rulewski, a political prisoner from Bydgoszcz freed under a newly announced amnesty, who was facing rearrest for reading a poem from the pulpit during a church service. This report exemplifies the conflation of poetry and politics that exerted such a fascination from Western readers, with a political activist choosing to address a crowd through poetry, and the government reacting to the poem with the same force with which they would treat a rousing, political address. Interestingly, the author of the poem is never specified in the article; there is no indication of its contents, either, apart from the title, "Night Prayer". The decision to omit such details implies that they are hardly important – that all

poetry in Poland is political enough for a reading to be considered “conduct and speech inspiring resistance and rebellion”<sup>24</sup> (“Freed Polish Rebel”, Reuters A.10).

The fascination with the dissident side of poetry resulted in a strong focus on the impressive underground publishing industry that Poland had developed, and its close ties with the Solidarity trade union and other political movements opposing the government. It further developed the portrait of dissident poets, dismissing the idea of inspired, but isolated individuals, leading a lonely and doomed battle out of a historically preconditioned sense of nobility and duty to the nation. Instead, they were part of a well structured, organised network of resistance, one that was able to seriously threaten the hegemony of the Communist Party, politically as well as culturally.

To go back to 1980: in October, the Reuters agency found space for the following lines in its two-hundred word press release concerning Miłosz’s Nobel Prize: “Most Poles know the work of their countryman through underground publications. Three years ago the underground publishing house Nowa, which is closely linked with the dissident Committee for Self-Defence, began producing a seven-volume edition of his poems and prose.” (“Poles Want The Works”, A11) This brief note, reprinted in the New York Times, established a direct connection between the poet who was to become the best known ambassador of Polish verse in the English-speaking world and a strictly political organisation in direct opposition to the communist rulers of the country. On later occasions, many of the newspaper articles about Poland that referred to poetry mentioned those who wrote it and organised political resistance in one breath.



In fact, some journalists went so far as to present the introduction of Martial Law and the subsequent measures undertaken by the government as motivated primarily by the desire to suppress a “new cultural wave in Poland.” A 1983 text from the Omaha Herald, for example, does mention Solidarity, but concentrates mostly on descriptions of the closing down of unofficial presses and the complicated situation of writers who face the choice between prison and a betrayal of their ideals. After noting that the thaw that had started in 1976, and resulted in a relaxation of censorship laws in 1980<sup>25</sup>, had encouraged the growth of a semi-tolerated publishing industry independent from official structures, the author describes the crackdown on artists that came after December 1981 and quotes poet Piotr Sommer’s remarks about the ensuing predicament awaiting those who would continue writing:

Underground presses are smashed; newspapers, magazines and literary journals are closed down, their editors and contributors interned along with the labor leaders. Journalists, writers, artists and filmmakers are detained or harassed. Their associations are disbanded. The pen and paintbrush, symbols of a thriving cultural life, are broken. Underground publications, tolerated by the government during the previous four years, are driven further underground, or die. The editors no longer risk printing their names; the writers publish under pseudonyms or initials. ... As the weeks passed, the government imposed a “verification” process on journalists, editors and writers, Sommer said. Only

those who passed an examination, amounting to a declaration of loyalty, were allowed to work. ... Polish writers are faced with a moral dilemma. How is culture to exist in this vacuum? Where can one publish one's work without being a collaborator? (Partsch 1)

The last sentence in the above quotation is critical, as it implies that any author who decided to enter official structures – by publishing his work in a state-owned house, for example – effectively committed treason. Conversely, the alternative, namely opting for a clandestine press (or one that operated outside of Poland), was a decision that validated the poet's political and artistic credentials.

Blurred distinctions between literary documents and texts with political or historical aspirations could also be noticed in academic sources. In 1984, The Slavic Review printed Alice-Catherine Carls' short paper on one of the major third circulation periodicals, the magazine Puls. Though a literary quarterly," she writes, "Puls can serve well as a historical source." She conceded that it was a literary publication, the magazine printed political articles alongside poetry of the Martial Law period, and introduced names unfamiliar to most western readers alongside authors who enjoyed a greater literary fame. Crucially, Carls identifies one of the main goals of the editors as the attempt to "compare the political roots of the Polish cultural opposition of yesterday and today and to point out similarities between them" (740-741).

By and large, public opinion treated officially published texts as unworthy of serious consideration. In his 1980 text on underground and official Charles Sawyer quotes a joke he overheard in Eastern Europe to illustrate the situation, in

which even artistically respected texts had no chance of being appreciated if they did not fall within the validating framework of the second or third circuit:

Somewhere east of what is still anachronistically called the Iron Curtain a man sits typing feverishly at a sheaf of onion skin and carbon sheets. Another man enters and asks, 'What are you typing?' 'War and Peace,' the first man answers. 'Are you crazy? There are copies everywhere,' cries the other. 'Sure, but who reads the printed page nowadays?' (Sawyer A.7)

This dualistic approach resurfaced frequently in the coverage of the situation in Poland, most notably, perhaps, in a 1986 New York Times piece by Kaufman. He described the stir caused by an interview with Zbigniew Herbert published in an underground literary monthly. The poet accused many of his famous colleagues of treachery and disloyalty, stating that whoever had published in officially sanctioned media had done so for more than questionable reasons. Kaufman repeated Herbert's view that he saw only three possible explanations for taking the official route: "(a) that they acted in fear and bad faith; (b) that they were motivated by vanity; and (c) that they acted out of base material motives." ("When Bedbugs Ate". Kaufman A.3) Kaufman justifies the widespread and highly emotional reaction to the interview by once again asserting the role poetry played in the fight against the authoritarian regime:

The subject, as always, is collaboration. Who did and who did not, who does and who does not. ... In a country where clandestine publications, letters from jail and the writings of political émigrés

inspired the long struggle for independence, the question of participation in official and outlaw cultures has always set off sympathetic resonances. Moreover, after the rise and suppression of Solidarity the discussions are hardly theoretical. Every day and, even more, every night, literary bootleggers produce and distribute newspapers, novels, volumes of poetry and tapes of lectures and recitals. Meanwhile, other writers, who accept the leading role of the Communist Party in literature as elsewhere, engage in heated, Government-sanctioned, literary union politics. (“When Bedbugs Ate”, Kaufman A.3)

It is significant that Kaufman’s text appeared in 1986, at a time when censorship was already far more relaxed than three years earlier. In fact, he even includes a quote from Herbert saying that the government would happily agree to print his work without any modifications. The Polish poet explains his decision to stay away from official publishers and send his work to Paris or to underground presses was motivated politically. He sees printing even unaltered poetry with Party leaders’ seal of approval as playing into their hands by helping them create the illusion that the long-divided Polish culture is finally undergoing normalisation (“When Bedbugs Ate”, A.3) .

The black-and-white view of the two camps, separated into freedom-fighting underground writers and greedy cowards on government pay, was certainly the most common. However, some articles did ask the question concerning the possibility of the existence of a fully-grown publishing industry,

complete with distribution channels and a large readership, without some sort of complicity on the side of those in command. Intriguingly, the texts that questioned the accepted attribution of roles were occasionally written by the same authors, and published by the same newspapers, as those that reinforced the more common and simpler viewpoint. Kaufman, for example, after noting the scale of underground operations, remarks that “the police in this country are efficient and paper supplies and access to printing equipment are both limited. Thus many people have asked how and why this underground culture has been allowed to flourish while the labor unions and political discussion groups that sprouted during the reign of the now-banned Solidarity trade union organization have been suppressed” (“Knock at the Door”, Kaufman A2). He hazarded an answer, citing the celebrated Polish novelist Tadeusz Konwicki, who suggested that the government’s main concern was no longer making all cultural production toe the party line, as it had been supplanted by the attractive idea of a rich, western-style cultural scene (“Knock at the Door”, Kaufman A2).

Lief anticipated the issue, noting a year before Kaufman that the authorities were becoming more lenient than most thought possible, but she failed to provide a plausible explanation, citing simply confusion amongst party officials as the reason for their lack of reaction:

Culture is an ambiguous area in the Polish government's political universe. Freedoms are limited and state censorship exists, but the boundaries of permitted expression expand and contract with seeming randomness. Members of Poland's cultural scene say the

authorities are divided on what kind of approach to take toward the artistic community. ... 'Our boundaries of tolerance are very broad now,' says Wisniewski, a member of the committee's Department of Culture. ... 'One is surprised by the possibilities of limits,' says a well-known Polish theater critic. 'It's a game between the authorities and the creator, a perpetual battle and test of strength.' (Lief 1)

With the increasing tolerance of underground literature in the 80s, there was a clear artistic consequence to this relaxation of censorship: poetry published by state houses, which once had enjoyed a nearly total monopoly, now had to contend with a rival capable of challenging it not only on moral, but also commercial grounds. This meant that if government sanctioned authors were to reach any audience at all, they had to regain a modicum of credibility, which entailed creating work that broke with the official political and aesthetic agenda, work whose artistic value was more important than its potential as a tool of propaganda. Kaufman, in particular, seemed convinced by this idea, which he first related as Konwicki's opinion, ( "Knock at the Door", Kaufman A.2), and reiterated as his own in two more articles, one in 1985, one in 1986 ( "Polish Writers", A.1, "When Bedbugs Ate", A.3). While this view was not echoed by other journalists at the time, it is important to note its existence, as it is perhaps the only suggestion that officially published literature may not have consisted entirely of worthless gobbledygook dictated by bureaucrats.

Another important consequence of the common view that poets were divided into those who were fighting for freedom and those willing to abandon their principles in exchange for a life of luxury in the oppressor's pay was a shift in the perception of their role, turning artists into activists working in a slightly unusual medium; only a small proportion of the newspaper articles referencing Polish poetry in the 80s actually focused on literary issues. The vast majority were simply concerned with recent events, and they brought in poets to comment not on the plight of the artist, but on the general socio-political situation in the country. As before, one of the most striking examples came from Miłosz, who wrote a passionate editorial for the New York Times five days after the introduction of Martial Law, denouncing it as a coup orchestrated by a "military junta" ("A Grave Responsibility", Miłosz A.35). Granted, commissioning articles on foreign affairs from poets was far from widespread; but employing them in the capacity of commentators happened with surprising regularity, especially if they happened to be on hand in the United States. Over the entire course of the decade, readers were offered Barańczak's thoughts about the role of the Soviet Union in the events of December, 1980 ("Three Poles", Dumanoski 4) and Miłosz's worries about the fascist strain in the Communist Party gaining power ("The Mask of Tyranny" p.1)<sup>26</sup>. As readers had been accustomed to hearing about Polish poetry in this context, news items such as the Houston Chronicle report relating that a pirate radio broadcast jamming a national TV channel chose to air poetry alongside "proposed changes to the Polish labor code" ("Wałęsa Says" 6) or the Los Angeles Times remark that "In fact, Milosz's name now is frequently mentioned in the

same breath as that of two of the world's most renowned Poles, Pope John Paul II and Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa” (Hoder 3.A) could not have been very surprising; and to be sure, the article relates this fact without so much as a comment about it being even slightly unusual.. While this manner of portraying poets probably resulted in more coverage than if they were only mentioned in texts addressing strictly literary issues, it did encourage a homogenising and one-dimensional view of Polish poetry in general.

Academic sources, meanwhile, tended to treat the idea of an actively dissident poetry with greater caution. Gifford poses the crucial question which is often ignored in newspapers: “is there reliable evidence that poetry, in Eliot’s words, ‘actually makes a difference to the society as a whole’?” The issue is of consequence, as western poets struggled with the concept significantly; in fact, positive answers from some sources were one of the reasons for the importance eventually attached to Central European – and thus Polish – poetry. Gifford gives one possible answer: “The debasement of language, once it is used to obfuscate rather than to establish truth, breeds cynicism. It may not be the only cause of social decline, but it does contribute to it powerfully. Indeed the language of advertisers, of public relations and the carefully created ‘image’, which plays so prominent a role in the free world, has brought a new kind of insincerity into our lives, and literature is not untouched by this.” (13-14) Further in his study, he argues poetry can make an impact through preserving history – and, perhaps most importantly, by reclaiming a language annexed by the oppressor.



Certainly, his interpretation of the subversive role of poetry differs considerably from most journalists' approach, and is more reminiscent of Barańczak's thoughts on the subject as quoted in Chapter 2. In a book published three years after Gifford's, and mere moments before the Autumn of Nations, Jeffrey C. Goldfarb also stresses the importance of language in the establishment of a totalitarian regime – or, to use the term he prefers, a totalitarian project. If we agree that the violent subjugation of language by the government is as important as he seems to think it is, than the work of poets positing “mówienie wprost” (direct speech) becomes of the utmost importance, less for its political content, and more for the politics of its subversion of the official language and restoration of credibility to the written word. This, of course, would mean that a major point of interest would be this reclamation of language, this staking out of a territory by poets; but appreciating it requires an approach that makes it possible to see poetry as more than marching songs and pamphlets (see 53-56).

The autonomous culture of Eastern Europe and the developing autonomous politics gain their distinctiveness, their poetic and democratic power, because they address such issues [relating to the complete politicization of life and language]. They seek an alternative to Newspeak, its ideological background, and the social and political world in which it is spoken. To seek such alternatives is an extremely difficult task. ... To be against totalitarianism, to be anti-communist and anti-Soviet, is not enough. It is merely to

declare, like an Orwell character, that Big Brother is ungood. (59-60)

The emphasis, according to Goldfarb, is thus on the necessity for poetry to establish a new language, rather than simply state its refusal to accept the reigning ideology and express its resistance to the existing order of things.

Goldfarb also stresses the fact that not all interesting Polish art was dissident, and that those who used official, censored channels could also create worthwhile works: he cites the example of Retrospektywa, a provocative work by the Teatr 77 company: “Yet these theatres were clearly not anti-Communist, and their members were not Polish dissidents. Rather, they were a group of artists (playwrights, actors, directors, musicians), some of whom were Party members, who through a legal channel offered alternative views of Polish life – cultural, political, artistic, and social. All their works were censored, yet they pushed and challenged, always attempting to expand the possibilities of expression.” He calls this phenomenon “embedded culture” – one that “uses official structures to strongly assert cultural autonomy” (65-66).

In academic and popular sources alike, this has been a rarely mentioned aspect of cultural life under communism, especially in the 80s; and Goldfarb takes it even further, contending that the official, Party-approved cultural policies could be seen as support for “a resisting, autonomous culture” (69). He views the availability of cultural traditions, supported by the Party in order to make the present system appear as the culmination of the nation’s history, as a factor that fosters the growth of non-conformist culture. “The availability of traditional works

has helped to transform contemporary creative expression. The obvious mediocrity of the bulk of socialist realism, when compared with the works of Tolstoy and Kandinsky, Mickiewicz and Wyspiański, Kafka and Mann, pushes the artist in the direction of the ideals of traditional art manifested in the models of the art works themselves and in the model of the creative process involved” (70). And in another passage: “Narrow formulas, artificially imposed as the basis of creation, and politically imposed component parts of the creative form (e.g. the necessity to portray a “positive hero”) may be overcome when the creative inspiration of the past, with all its richness, is used as an alternative ... Creators who make such a choice often find themselves at odds with the state cultural apparatus” (71, 72).

Importantly, Goldfarb contends that real freedom is built through truly independent art, which is distinct from art created in order to oppose the powers that be; in other words, true deconstruction of the extant order is brought about by cultural activity that ignores it and renders it obsolete, instead of actively fighting through more or less direct pamphleteering (see 87-88). Furthermore, while dissident authors speak in familiar terms and refer to realities well-known to their peers, the fame and prestige thrust upon them as dissidents can have surprisingly negative, discouraging influence on his or her home culture.

The celebrity of the cultural dissident leads to a politics of despair, grand moral gestures within the context of social isolation. By itself the stellar quality of the dissident makes opposition difficult, because opposition becomes beyond the realm of mere mortals. ... Thus the sentimental romantic image of the dissident artist or

intellectual as hero places a serious constraint on cultural excellence and political action. When the alternative culture of the East is viewed through such sentiment, it becomes its opposite, unidimensional ideology set against the totalitarian order. (99)

Felicity Roslyn wrote about a very similar notion in the introductory paragraphs of her article about Szymborska, wherein she suggested that acting as a nation's conscience can be stifling for an artist, and argued this was an inescapable part of "life in Poland, which is one long round of coercion: coercion by one's friends as much as the state, for Poland is a country where private life is lived in relation to public considerations" (180). She wondered about the possible influence this may have had on the formation of a canon, which she contends may well be built on moral or partisan criteria rather than purely artistic ones. She asks herself "what it means to Zbigniew Herbert that when he writes a poem, the whole country listens. When so many other people's definition of integrity depends on yours, the net effect is hardly to be distinguished from tyranny. Not on your definition of integrity, that is, but on your actually having it. Poles are very literal-minded about poets" (180).

## **2.2 After the Change**

Embodying morality and acting as a guiding sign towards the right moral choices under an oppressive regime can put poets in a precarious position. In the introduction to his 1992 collection of essays on Polish poetry, translator and poet Adam Czerniawski warns that "however committed the poetry may be to the national cause, it must never betray its aesthetic obligations. The creation and

preservation of aesthetic objects enriches a culture, and the richer the culture, the more likely it is to survive oppression, the more worthwhile its liberation and protection. A poem need not pretend to be a political programme or a gun” (23). I would argue that the mere creation of “aesthetic objects” will not suffice if the common perception of the author does not lead readers to expect a work of art, but text that has a specific function, pertaining to a situation that is rapidly receding into the past. Later in the book, in his own critical essay, Czerniawski notes that “poetry has emerged into post-totalitarian Poland with its honour intact: it has preserved national values, memories and aspirations,” but he acknowledges the fact that its success at the mission will lead to its gradual descent into the obscurity reserved for the arts in prosperous societies. He acknowledges that “[poetry’s] role as chronicler of national consciousness is redundant, and it is already an early victim of shifts in readers’ taste. This is not, as observed by the critic Tadeusz Komendant, merely the sorry result of being exposed to ‘market forces’” (201).

What else, then, leads readers away from volumes of verse? Also in The Mature Laurel, Donald Pirie contends that the risks once associated with obtaining and perusing a collection of unofficially published poetry “lent a sense of danger and urgency to the act of reading; it brought a feeling of complicity between poet and reader” (202). This has disappeared with the old regime, and nothing has really been able to fill the void in the face of the entirely new conditions: there is no need to preserve national history in poetry, Polish identity is no longer threatened explicitly, readers are now individuals with their own concerns rather

than a relatively uniform group in an infinitely predictable reality, and people no longer relate to a common, rock solid value system.

Ten years later, Chris Miller vividly rendered the paradoxical predicament Polish poets faced when the hated communist government finally fell in the opening paragraph of his article on new Polish poetry.

Let us begin with a heroic past: a nation existing in language alone. Its national ethos is sacrifice, and it stands on a border with barbarity. This turns out to be borderline deprivation; just getting by under Soviet Communism is struggle enough, without taking on the depraved and universal state. Heroism costs you your job; your daughter can't go to university. It seems unfair: in the past, obviously, you could die to the last man, and often did, and if it never helped much, the principle at least was clear. But now you have your kids to think of, and even the scout troop is politics. Aha! Let us remove this bushel of oppression, and substitute the dazzling neon of re-nascent capitalism. Fifty years inveighing against the Capitalist, and now you must worship the entrepreneur (who sees no duty to keep you alive). What does this do to your poetry? ("On Not Writing" 69)

The disillusionment of poets and disinterest of readers within the poet's own culture beg the question of the fate of Polish poetry abroad, where it had been marketed exclusively as political for an extended period of time.

Needless to say, when the round table of 1989 came about and democracy replaced the totalitarian, single-party system, it became difficult for popular media to keep writing about poets within the long-established frame of reference of dissidents and collaborators. That period brought a spate of articles wondering about the future of dissident poetry, echoing the misgivings of critics cited above: its role had been so closely associated with resisting the system that most journalists wondered how it could possibly adjust to the new situation. In April 1990, the Chicago Tribune printed, on its first page, an article entitled “Victory’s irony: Eastern European writers confront the spectre of a shifting Muse.” It opened with the following lines:

For 40 years, the communist regimes of Eastern Europe tried proving the pen inferior to the sword. Novelists and poets whose literary vision threatened the party line didn't get published. Some were reduced to circulating manuscripts through a trusted circle of friends, praying the secret police weren't among their readers. Others, seeking freedom abroad, had to surrender a writer's basic nourishment: the daily sounds of his mother tongue. ... Now communism's failure has left them in a curious kind of literary limbo. ... In the West, precisely because of freedom, literature is an academic or leisure pursuit. In Eastern Europe it was a vehicle for understanding the daily realities of repression. The creative energies that resulted have been sustaining these writers even

today. Like their American counterparts, they now sometimes find themselves searching for a new jolt of inspiration. (Grossman 1)

From this point on, two seemingly mutually exclusive currents became apparent in Anglophone popular media: on the one hand, as I have shown in the previous section, history was still frequently presented as the driving force behind Polish poetry, and its source of inspiration; but on the other, growing numbers of articles strove to describe the quandaries of poets who could no longer fulfil their traditional role began to make their appearance. Newspaper editors had, in essence, lost one of the figures they most commonly used to mediate texts about Poland in general and Polish culture in particular. However, instead of relinquishing it entirely, they sought new ways in which the character of the Polish poet could be employed to convey to their readers a sense of the changes that were taking place in the country.

One usage for the figure of the poet favoured by the press consisted of utilising authors to show how their assimilation in the new, democratic, capitalist society reflects the beneficial developments in Poland. By quoting Miłosz when he states that Poland now enjoys a thriving book market and a vigorous cultural life (Wroe 6) or by expressing joy that an ex-dissident now runs a moderately successful press (Hyde 21), journalists endeavoured to show advantageous sides to the forced recasting of poets in a new role. Showing that they were just like Western poets – or better yet, no longer poets at all, but small entrepreneurs – had the added benefit of reducing Poland's otherness, and was used by some British newspapers prior to Poland's accession to the European Union to foster positive



attitudes towards this new member state. The introduction to the 2003 Roger Boyes article in The Times about the role Poland could play in the new economy begins with a reference to the well-known archetype and moves on to a situation that is much more familiar from the home ground:

Polish poets have for centuries held their country to be the ‘heart of Europe’, the pulsing, romantic centre of the Continent. Joining the European Union is thus regarded by many Poles as an historical footnote: a belated recognition of a self-evident truth. ‘Of course Poland is Europe to its very core,’ says a former dissident who now runs his own successful software company. ‘The point is to raise awareness of this among our Western partners and to remind them that Warsaw is as European as Paris.’ (3)

However, the majority of the articles that broached the subject of the changed fortunes of poets in ex-Soviet bloc nations painted a grim picture, frequently decrying Western influence on what they perceived as having been a haven of socially involved high culture. While the role poets played in the Autumn of Nations is usually acknowledged, the authors of these texts are more interested in the dismal fate that awaited those who lived to see communism fall. The Village Voice published, in 1995, an article wherein Vladimir Tismaneanu, a Romanian professor of Sociology and Politics at the University of Maryland, paints a picture of Central Europe as a region full of countries that rejects those writers and intellectuals who helped free them.

And now as the time of revolutionary euphoria associated with the fall has passed, its aftermath is marked by frustration and bitter disappointment. The moral polls heralded by Central Europe dissident writers have not come true. Instead, there is noise, discomfiture, and nostalgia for the good old days. ... Dissidents were the tribunes of Western values, and as many people nowadays resent what they perceive as Western indifference, these very intellectuals are held in contempt, accused of groundless idealism, utopianism, and wish thinking. As their very existence is a constant reminder of how few really resisted Communism, it becomes fashionable to discard their altruism. People have learned how to hate and scorn them. (“Knowing and Doing”)

Tismaneanu was not alone in highlighting the paradox whereby the days of communism can be remembered with nostalgia by the very poets, writers, and intellectuals who helped to oust their government’s power. British journalists noticed it too, with George Hyde mentioning the plight of writers who have to learn to cope with the free market in his review of Piotr Sommer’s poetry (21), for example. While the problems stemming from the changing role were reasonably well covered, the popular media made very few attempts at indicating how poets cope with this change of their social function – and whether the younger generations aspired to the same status as that which their predecessors had enjoyed under the old system. Some scattered references to a possible drive towards a reinvention of poetry did appear; however, this was mostly limited to observations

by poets with dissident credentials, who strove to fit in the new reality – one instance is Zagajewski reminiscing about the long-gone days of militant poetry, and the necessity to relinquish the role of the moral compass: “From the political point of view ... there was in fact no question that right was on the young poets' side. Unfortunately, though, one must distinguish rightness from self-righteousness. Only artistic pedants can safely indulge in displays of their own infallibility.” (Wojahn 15) In the entire corpus of texts from popular media that I have studied, virtually the only mention of a new generation striving to cut ties with the past comes as a quote from Jerzy Jarniewicz, poet, translator and critic, reflecting on the possible future of Polish poetry after Miłosz.

Poets who published their first books in the late 80s and 90s have largely rejected both the official culture and the underground ethos ... Theirs is a poetry of enormous scepticism and distrust. It goes in fear of anything that is pretentious and prophetic, and so they have replaced communal experience - which is a key idea in Miłosz, and in Polish poetry generally - and instead focused on what is unique and individual and personal. As one younger poet said, 'there is nothing about me in the constitution'. (Wroe 8)

It is worth noting that this article appeared in 2001, which means Anglophone newspaper readers had to wait eleven years from the regime change before seeing an indication there may be something new brewing on the Polish literary scene; meanwhile, in Chapter 2 of this dissertation I have shown that

according to Polish critics, the first signs of a change in ideas about the function of poetry can be traced back to the early 80s.

Academia was quicker in predicting a decline in the popularity of central and eastern European verse. In 1992, Czerniawski was already sensing a potential problem with Polish poetry. "If poems were merely embellished versions of political programmes, they would lose their interest once these programmes were fulfilled or abandoned. Poems with such limited ambitions become part of historical and sociological material," he argues, but the problem is more pronounced than he assumes (8). While he optimistically predicted that the texts "where the authors have paid attention to the aesthetic dimension, live on as literature, even if the political doctrines they propound now strike us as anachronistic, impractical or even mad," reality showed that the "aesthetic dimension" was not, in fact, as important as the reputation the poetry had built amongst its readers. What had ensured its popularity and marketability was also to prove its downfall.

In the introduction to his 2006 book, Remaining Relevant After Communism, Andrew Baruch Wachtel observes, with the benefit of hindsight, that talent notwithstanding, Eastern European authors owed their popularity to a set of circumstances that combined to ensure them international recognition.

Writers do not become as renowned as Kundera merely because they are talented (although a considerable amount of literary talent is undoubtedly required), but also because local and international cultural conditions allow and encourage their talent to be widely

recognized and appreciated. Publishers must wish to make Kundera available, critics must decide to review him, state and privately funded groups must award him prizes, and readers (both in his country and abroad) must choose to buy and, at least in some cases, to read his work. The phenomenon “Milan Kundera” is, therefore, as much sociocultural as literary. (2)

After thus acknowledging the complex mechanisms that lie behind the rise to fame of Eastern European writers, Wachtel notes that the conditions that led to their popularity in the West have changed dramatically and seem unlikely to ever return to a similar configuration. He quotes Serbian critic Mihailo Pantić, who ruefully retraces the plunge of poetry from an acclaimed position in a nation’s culture to the status of a rather obscure hobby.

From what had been an elite art form, which in a synthetic way recapitulated the general truths of people’s experience and which deepened their understanding of reality... artistic literature in the post socialist cultural model has become socially unnecessary, an almost completely private affair which lacks any social importance and which is interesting only to narrow academic circles, to writers, and to rare dedicated readers who nurture their passion as other marginal groups nurture theirs. Some people belong to satanic cults, some to the Society for Lovers of Bulldogs, and others, amazingly, read Serbian poetry. (2)

In fact, Wachtel goes so far as to accept the importance once attached to literature as the cultural common denominator of the disparate countries that make up what is variously referred to as Central or Eastern Europe. “Scanning the cultural map of the region as a whole, I hazard to propose a cultural definition of Eastern Europe that to my knowledge has not been used before: Eastern Europe is the part of the world where serious literature and those who produce it have traditionally been overvalued ... in comparison with their counterparts in the rest of the world.” (4)

Eastern European literature exerted a strong attraction on Western readers and critics because it was different. After the fall of communism, however, it became apparent that when it came to broadcasting the poetry to foreign lands, features such as style or content were given little attention: there was only one selling point. Wachtel provides an adequate summary:

When one examines the way in which East European literature was presented before 1989, it becomes apparent that, whatever the author’s style or theme, these books were marketed as political statements. In her introduction to Milan Kundera’s The Farewell Party, for example, Elizabeth Pochoda writes: ‘The Farewell Party attests to the longevity of political oppression in Czechoslovakia by never mentioning it.’ That either the absence or presence of a theme was seen as a guarantee of its importance was beneficial to East European writers in the cold war period, as it ensured that Western audiences could be induced to find their work worth

reading. Now, however, they must pay a stiff price for previous marketing techniques, for in the absence of political relevance neither readers nor publishers find any reason to be concerned with their work. (67)

### **3. DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF POLISH POETRY**

#### **3.1 Common Themes**

Given the strong bias towards representing Polish poetry as a politically significant force, it is perhaps unsurprising that it was portrayed as dealing with themes that were mostly directly related to its role: historical references, calls to arms, satires, in a word – politics. This was, in the West, a strongly discredited thematic field, with most political poetry dismissed by serious poets and critics as mere pamphleteering. However, Polish poetry was held in high esteem precisely due to the qualities that set it apart from the writing that originated on the other side of the Iron Curtain, and chief among those qualities was, as I have already established, the ability to produce socially themed verse without compromising its artistic quality.

Among academics, this involved a closer scrutiny of what it meant to be a political poet. In their 1980 paper on Zbigniew Herbert, John and Bogdana Carpenter warn that “the word ‘political’ should be applied to Herbert's poems with great care.” They explain that the simple duality of “lyrical” and “political” is not applicable to Herbert, and go on to argue that “if ‘political’ is defined as narrow contemporary relevance, a good case could be made for Herbert as an anti-

political poet.” (40) Eight years later, poet and critic Jerzy Jarniewicz proposed the following definition in The Cambridge Quarterly: “‘political’ here need not mean pointed allusion to contemporary events, or - worse - canvassing for one side or the other, but simply the attempt to identify the mechanisms of power, and put the political conflict into a historical or moral perspective” (“Under Eastern Eyes” 97).

Meanwhile, in the popular press, journalists struggled with addressing the commonly held conviction that “political” poetry can never be “good.” A justification had to be found as to why Polish poets could write activist poetry with impunity, a prerogative denied to their Western counterparts. Unsurprisingly, most authors chose to argue that writing about grand historical themes is justified if one has experienced major upheavals personally; first-hand experience validates the use of themes that would be discarded as melodramatic and unacceptable if related by proxy. Thus, in a discussion of Miłosz’s thematic range published in 1982, one can read that “if Miłosz can contain history and ideas in the subjective form of the lyric, it is because his relationship to them is personal, intimate. In the later poems, Miłosz traverses vast panoramas of time and vast expanses of autobiographical experience, but he does so through images that are like concrete signposts of memory, quick and poignant anchors for the imagination” (“The Poet”, Hoffman A.29).

The argument that worked for Miłosz could be applied to all Polish authors; and such was the weight that historical events added to poetry that in the 80s, expressing views critical of the art became a rare occurrence in the press,



almost as if questioning the quality of a poem were tantamount to aligning oneself with the Poland's oppressors. In fact, even if the criticism came from Polish sources, it was frequently trivialised and only mentioned briefly. When Ronald Sukenick discussed the underground literary scene, for example, he noted that "Several writers and critics indicated that second-circuit literature tends to be overvalued because of its political content", but quickly stated that despite these opinions "it is also clear that some important work has emerged." (A.9) The context does not make it clear in what way the work is important, artistically or politically, and in effect, encourages a reading that does not differentiate between the two. In other words, in the case of Polish poetry, the political message was what determined the value of the work.

This practice of equating the political stance expressed in a poem with its quality remained common throughout the decade. In 1981, Pinsky described a situation where he discovered a young man he met at a party was the spoilt son of a government official after the latter expressed a negative opinion about Miłosz's verse (A.4); in 1985, Kaufman quoted Konwicki's assertion that "what you have to understand ... is that for almost 200 years we have judged our writers not by what they wrote but by how they behaved at the barricades." (A.1); and in 1989, Edwin McDowell interviews an American publisher willing to publish Polish fiction and poetry even if he does not expect to make much profit from them, finding value in the fact that "These people have experienced some of the most traumatic and dramatic events of the 20th century ... And now we have a chance to hear about it directly from them." ("Media Business", D10) Needless to say, this

approach begged the question of what would happen if history were to be clement towards Poles for a change, and the grand romantic imperative forcing poets to write for their country would be lifted. If the main value of the work stems from the author's personal experience, which gives him or her license to explore themes inaccessible to most of those who write in the West, the disappearance of their main source of inspiration can vastly reduce reader interest.

As a consequence, some of the journalists writing articles about dominant themes in Polish poetry after 1989 chose not to change their tone or approach, and continued arguing that literature from this part of the world remained worthwhile for the same reasons as in the days of Solidarity. In 1994, Adam Zamoyski made the following familiar statement in the Times:

The uniquely strange and horrible combination of events that has taken place [in Eastern Europe] seems to grow more significant as it recedes rather than fading away into history. It moulds the imagination to such an extent that it pervades the fiction of young authors as much as it does the reminiscences of old survivors ... A deep fascination with the past pervades some of the most powerful writing of men and women born in Eastern Europe after the war.

("Ever-present Past", Zamoyski)

It became difficult to discuss Polish poetry in other terms. In 1996, for example, when trying to present Szymborska's poetry to the readers of the Wall Street Journal, Amy Gamerman struggled to tackle the fact that the recent Nobel laureate would not fit easily in the traditional activist mould. While she did admit

that “the poems in her collections leapfrog from one unlikely issue to another,” Gamerman can only go so far as to note that “Ms. Szymborska’s poetry is not overtly political” (A.5), as if reluctant to admit that, on occasion, a Polish poet can focus on other topics. Meanwhile, although Szymborska has written overtly engaged verse, much of her work is philosophical in nature, and could not be in good conscience classified as activist poetry..

Interestingly, the myth has become so entrenched that some reviewers of Polish poetry still feel the need to pre-emptively warn readers if the author they are recommending focused on what they felt were unorthodox topics. As recently as 2005, British poet and critic Mark Ford introduced Piotr Sommer – who can by no means be considered a young, or new, poet – with the following caveat: “his work will perhaps disappoint those who are convinced that all Polish poetry must be a vehicle for political resistance. It doesn't accord much with the way we still expect Polish - or indeed east European poetry generally - to sound” (18).

And yet, there were some attempts to signal that the new political situation had changed the function of the poets in society, the ambitions of the poets themselves, and their ideas about their craft. In 1992, the Guardian reprinted excerpts from the introduction to the Faber Book of European Poetry. The author, poet and critic Al Alvarez, appeared adamant that a change would have to come: “After the revolutions of 1989, the younger poets are inheriting a vastly changed scene where altogether different rules will apply. The last couple of years have seen the end not just of an empire but of a secular religion. Whatever happens now to European poetry, it is bound to be different from what has been produced in the

last 45 years.” (“Terror: A Muse Without Shelf Life”) Even a prominent literary figure like Alvarez, however, failed to provoke an overview of new talent from Poland with this foray into the world of mass media.

While certain journalists did realise change was inevitable, there was no noticeable drive to examine the new generations of Polish poets, who, as the second chapter of this dissertation has shown, had been looking for new directions ever since the early 80s. Instead, their writing manifested the developments in the perception of the Polish literary scene in through their choice of a number of the less obvious routes listed below.

Some opted to concentrate the evolution in the writing of those poets who had already been introduced to Anglophone readers, showing their move from activism to other realms (e.g. “Adam Zagajewski’s Poems” T.12; Ivry A.6). A few of them took the opportunity to problematise the received notion of Polishness by comparing it to the new stylistic choices of these relatively well-known poets, noting either comforting similarities or intriguing divergences. In his piece about Sommer, for example, Hyde noted that: “at the end of the day, Sommer is still very Polish ... the boundary between private and public experience is frequently transgressed” (21); and James Hopkin’s feature on Różewicz illustrates the other end of the spectrum, as he discusses the very “un-Polish” themes present in the work of Różewicz in this Guardian piece (“Poetry of Laughter”).

Another alternative was to move away from the contemporary Polish background, through focusing on works produced in more remote periods. It seems that when the political reading was no longer relevant, there was a greater

willingness to look at Polish poetry as a body of work that has existed before the Second World War, as evidenced by the publication of reviews of several translations of early Polish poetry under the patronage of widely recognised figures, such as Kochanowski's "Laments" rewritten in English by Seamus Heaney and Stanisław Barańczak, or Adam Czerniawski's versions of Norwid's poems (see Kellaway 1; Navrozov 25). These articles are also unusual in that they revolve around the poetry itself; granted, they do provide some historical background for the poets, but their focus is firmly and nearly exclusively on the verse, which is rarely the case with articles that examine more contemporary poetry from Poland.

A third tactic consisted of familiarising readers with Polish poets by appropriating them as part of a Western heritage, a strategy employed both towards contemporary authors and those from the past. In 1994, Stephen Dobyns wrote about Herbert that he "is a militantly Western poet," and he only acknowledged a political aspect of the Pole's work insofar as it could be related to the lifestyles led by the readers of the New York Times (BR.22); ten years later, the already quoted Navrozov wrote that Norwid's poetry "attains a grandeur ... through the use of certain cross-border harmonies that make the listener proud to be a native of Europe and a product of her culture" (25). With the political edge gone, this presentation of Polish poetry made it possible for Anglophone readers to relate to them as an element of their own literary history, rather than as an alien literature produced under circumstances none of them had experienced.

In fact, when it comes to Europe, British readers saw a number of articles appear around the time when Poland joined the European Union, most of them in the pro-expansion Guardian, as the newspaper strove to alleviate anti-EU sentiment. Next to a sudden rise in general interest in the region, an additional impulse came from government programmes meant to make new member states appear more familiar and less threatening by making their cultures more accessible (e.g. Evans 36; Boyes 3; “Polish Up on Poland” 61; “Expand to Fit” 7). Perhaps the most interesting of these articles is Stephanie Merritt’s Observer<sup>27</sup> feature, addressing as it does the problems that stem from the exalted status of translated poetry:

The signature of the Treaty of Accession on 16 April marked the beginning of a new expansion for the European Union, with the confirmation of 10 new member states who will join next May. In celebration of this development, and to show how much we admire and value our near-neighbours (recent ideological differences notwithstanding), the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is launching an initiative to persuade the public to take a greater interest in European culture, particularly literature. ... It's a noble sentiment, but even MacShane acknowledges that a bit of government chivvying is not going to make many of us rush to the station bookshop in search of volumes of Polish poetry instead of a Harry Potter. ... There is still a preconception in this country that European literature is somehow inherently worthy, possibly

because we've assimilated an American mistrust of intellectuals.

(16)

Merritt's point is well made, and the fact that Polish poetry is used as an antithesis of Harry Potter shows how it had become shorthand for writing dealing with heavy subjects, a branch of literature that can under no circumstances be assumed to be a source of entertainment. The pejorative connotations of the word "worthy" show a certain wariness of texts that one fears one may not appreciate despite their reputation as important cultural artefacts.

### **3.2. Style, Language and Translation**

I have shown the general opinion about the subjects Polish poets usually tackled – however, elsewhere in her article, Merritt also indicates that the low demand for Polish poetry amongst the English reading public may stem from the general unwillingness to publish and promote translations (16). In fact, the topic of translation was, on occasion, discussed in newspaper articles and academic or critical publications alike; interestingly, in popular media, these articles represent a large proportion of the few occasions on which aspects of Polish poetry such as style and language are mentioned at all. Two trends can be discerned: the first one, present from the very beginning of the studied period, leans towards the idea that translation of poetry is a nearly impossible task; the other, gaining in prominence in the post-1989 era, wonders at the ease and fidelity with which Polish poems can be rendered in English.

The first trend is represented, among others, by the Swedish Academy. When they awarded Miłosz the Nobel Prize, they acknowledged the fact that his “writing can only be fully appreciated by those who can read it in Polish,” and William Borders reprinted this opinion in his New York Times article on the subject (A.1). However, he failed to specify what exactly the Academy felt disappeared from the Pole’s work in the process of translation<sup>28</sup>. Thirteen years later, in the article I have cited in this chapter already, Alvarez made an attempt at pinpointing translation-related problems, only to argue that even losses sustained in transit from one language to another were not enough to reject Polish poetry altogether.

No one had much time for the poetry of foreigners. If they bothered with an excuse - mostly, they didn't - it was the old chestnut: poetry is what gets lost in translation. Maybe it is. For example, I am told that, for his fellow countrymen, part of Zbigniew Herbert's originality and influence resides in the way he has transformed the language and technique of Polish poetry. None of that survives translation - or is even translatable. But that does not make his poems any less extraordinary when you read him in English. (21)

He goes on to argue that Herbert’s “strength and range and independence and restraint ... [and] nobility” shone through regardless of the loss of his linguistic innovation (21). This is a crucial observation, in that it is representative of a relatively common approach towards Polish poetry – namely, that its primary values are ethical and historical, but not aesthetic. Readers can turn to it for



accounts of the everyday atrocities common under totalitarian regimes, and for moral guidance, but they should not expect anything other than sparse minimalism when it comes to style.

Such an attitude is not surprising considering the strong emphasis on social function and subject matter in the texts that mediated Polish poetry, which makes literary panache seem superfluous and out of place, but it is not without its consequences: it is easy to move from believing that the loss of formal and linguistic aspects does little to limit the effectiveness of a translated body of poetry to considering that these aspects are negligible, or non-existent altogether – and this is reflected in those articles that promote the belief that Polish poems are all easily translatable. This excerpt from Kenneth Sherman’s article about Herbert exemplifies this conviction and its roots neatly:

Herbert's work shares a clear-eyed intellectuality with the poetry of Nobel laureates Czeslaw Milosz and Wislawa Szymborska. The three responded to propaganda and double-speak with plain, direct language. As a result, their work translates readily. ... There are many imaginative surprises. ... But Herbert is not intoxicated with language; we find none of the runaway imagery or automatic surrealism that mars the work of many North American poets.

(WP.15)

The three best known Polish poets, widely considered to be representative of the country’s entire poetry scene, are thus portrayed as advocates of unadorned speech, keeping a safe distance from “intoxicating” language. Outside of articles

that reference translations, the only texts that mention aspects of poetry other than its subject are analyses devoted to individual poets, especially if they are reviews of individual volumes published in English. It is easy for readers of popular media to treat them as representative of the whole, and assume the entire Polish literary scene writes like one of the big three (with the possible later additions of Zagajewski, Różewicz, and Sommer).

I have shown in Chapter 2 that according to Polish critics, poets in the country were very far from speaking in one voice. Even among those who actively fought the government's newspeak in the 80s groups as diverse as the New Wave and the New Privacy co-existed. This is perhaps the greatest difference between the coverage of Polish poetry in Poland and abroad. Within the country, poetic movements and groups constituted one of the main tools for critical analysis; outside of its borders, they are hardly taken into account. Readers of Anglophone newspapers could be forgiven for not knowing there were any literary formations in the country at all. In the entire corpus of articles under scrutiny, only two texts contain references to a specific formation; they both refer to *Nowa Fala* in passing, and make no intimation about the existence of other, rival factions (see Hyde 21; Wojahn 14).

## 4. RECEPTION

### 4.1 Polish Poetry's Idealised Image

Polish poetry's image in the eyes of Western journalists was strongly idealised, in part because their concept of the scene in the country presented such a stark contrast with their idea of what English and American poetry was like. In Poland, if one were to believe American journalists, poems possessed a strength and commanded a following reminiscent of the bards of olden days, and retained a high level of relevance to the entire society, so much so that they could, in fact, have real influence on everyday life. Thus, when Czesław Miłosz was asked to present a prestigious poetry lecture at Harvard University, as part of a series named after Charles Eliot Norton, New York Times journalist Alfred Kazin commented that "Poetry' suddenly takes on a Slavic vehemence and political importunity that are unfamiliar to American poets and critics of poetry and would have alarmed genteel Charles Eliot Norton." (A.1)

This idea of political urgency inherent to poetry co-existed with the conviction that Polish society in general is characterised by a greater propensity towards the appreciation of the arts. Another New York Times article from the 80s, which recounted the tale of its author's train journey through Europe, painted a distinctly rose-tinted picture of Poland, depicting it as a kind of Old World paradise of unhurried sophistication.

In Poland, men, even students, still kiss women's hands in greeting and parting. Occasionally men on buses tip their hats when passing churches. ... People converse knowledgeably about their literature

and history. Art exhibitions are important events. Poetry is read, books are cherished. ... Talk of revolution is not unheard of. The dead are remembered. Western Europe, by contrast, has become so Americanized that on arriving there many Americans no longer feel the exhilaration that comes from finding yourself in a truly foreign land. Eastern Europe restores that feeling to you. (Swick A.21)

The tone of the entire article is similar to this fragment; although elsewhere in the text, Swick acknowledges the poverty, police violence, and strict governmental control over spheres of life that are usually considered strictly private, he still manages to see a utopia in Poland due to the importance its inhabitants attach to art and courtesy. Reports such as this one stress the otherness of Poland, and connect the unique, idealised status of the poetry produced there with the differences between the conditions there and in the broadly conceived West.

Parenthetically, it is worth noting that just as the idea of dissident verse remained present in Anglophone journalism even after there was no longer anybody to rebel against, the inclination to romanticise Polish poetry did not disappear entirely with the change of regime. Even post-1990, subjects such as discussions about the Polish reverence traditionally reserved for poets (Hodges) and remarks on the world-wide appeal of poetry from Poland ("A Poetry That Matters," Hirsch T.12) remained popular; even in 2007, eighteen years after the change of regime and with very few new Polish poets successfully introduced to Anglophone audiences since then, David Orr opened his article on a Zbigniew

Herbert's newly published Collected Poems, 1956-1998 with a paragraph implying that poetry is a national characteristic – almost a natural resource to be found on the shores of the Vistula:

It's easy to say which nation has the fastest trains (France) or the largest number of prime ministers who've probably been eaten by sharks (Australia), but it's impossible to know which country has the best writers, let alone the best poets. Even so, if cash money was on the line, you'd find few critics willing to bet against Poland.

(14)

One reason for the enduring myth of Polish dissident poetry was that Poland was so often held up as a sort of model society, a perfect environment for socially significant poetry. The 1988 text by Jarniewicz, prompted by the publication of a new anthology of British poetry in Polish, embarks upon a comparison of roles between the two countries. He quotes Morrison and Motion and their preface to Contemporary British Poetry, and agrees with their claim that British poets are “not inhabitants of their own lives so much as intrigued observers, not victims but onlookers.” In his opinion, that makes the Brits polar opposites to their Polish counterparts, who are supposed to address not only their own lives, but the totality of the experience of their nation, and possibly all of humankind (95). Jarniewicz remarks that poets on the Isles have become a retiring, quiet group.

British poets have refused to be philosophers, or politicians, or moralists: they have changed into onlookers and craftsmen instead.

Though in the eyes of ordinary Englishmen, Shakespeare is not only a poet, but a human authority, no such thing is expected of the modern poet. He no longer plays the role of a public consciousness (or conscience); gone are the days of Dante, Baudelaire, Mandelstam and Lowell. It is the very opposite case from that prevailing in Poland, where at a poetry reading the poet may also have to face questions on philosophy, politics, economics or religion: all relating to ultimate issues. (98)

Seen from the West, the stance adopted by Polish poets could seem utterly fantastic. Not only are the poets on the frontlines of the fight against oppressive governments, they also double as philosophers, politicians, economists, and spiritual leaders. Goldfarb argues that “the creative artist then is the hero, locked in a battle with the forces of darkness. The work then has interest and appeal through the sentimental appreciation of the battle, i.e., the idea that life itself can be and has been on the line. Such imagery accounts for the superficial appeal of the dissident in the West” (97).

It is perhaps worth emphasising yet again the fact that the post-1989 situation had little to do with the ideal world of “Under Eastern Eyes.” Writing four years after Jarniewicz, Barańczak does acknowledge that artists had enjoyed a special standing in pre-1989 Polish society, and the reason he gives for their exalted status is that they were purveyors of truth. He writes “it was enough for them to utter a few words of truth or offer an undistorted picture of the otherwise systematically falsified reality to win instant admiration and a following reaching

far beyond the cultural elite.” However, the changes on the political scene mean that the channels of communication have multiplied, and readers can now find other sources of information – “Poland,” he points out, “has had no censorship for almost a year now” (“Feeling Spurned”). And so, if a few years before the time of writing of his paper any work of literature boasted a sheen of dissident relevance simply by virtue of being published, he remarks that at the time of writing, the demand for political literature has all but disappeared.

This kind of reading does not interest anybody in Poland any more. For one thing, after all these years the rules of such interpretation have become too easy to master, and its results have turned out too simplistic; for another, in a reverse reaction that seems almost ominous in its hasty and largely visceral quality, Polish culture consumers have been demonstrating in recent months their increasing weariness with politics as such and with politicized arts in particular. ... Polish culture today must face a shocking fact: it is not everybody's darling any more, as it was in the years of martial law or, farther back, under the maddening censorship of the sixties and seventies, or, even farther back, under the uninhibited oppression of the Stalinist years. (“Feeling Spurned”)

In fact, people's sensitivities had changed so much that when he himself came to Poland for a series of readings, expecting the usual barrage of political questions, he was instead questioned in detail about his structural decisions when translating poetry from English. This anecdote shows that poetry went in the

direction Wachtel had predicted – towards becoming a specialised subject, of interest to a group of aficionados who value it for its own sake. This, however, also heralds a significant drop in the number of readers, and sure enough, Barańczak also comments on the harsh realities of the new free marketplace. It would appear, he argues, that underground publishers, with their reputations built over the years, know-how, and lists of authors, should make the transition to capitalism relatively smoothly. Many have tried, Barańczak says, “but reality has mostly had a sobering effect on their dreams of becoming modern Poland's new Hearsts. Periodicals and books that the readers, just a couple of years ago, would have spent their rent money on - more than that, they would have risked a search at home or a prison sentence for the privilege of reading them--hardly sell at all today” (“Feeling spurned”).

And yet, given the reputation of Polish poetry, the popular media's propensity towards presenting it as an example to be followed, or a paragon to be aspired to, is perhaps unsurprising. Even with the prevalence of this outlook in mind, however, the frequency with which Anglophone verse has been unfavourably compared to the writings of Herbert, Miłosz, Szymborska, and their compatriots is arresting. This predominant trope is expressed forcefully in Kazin's account of Miłosz's Norton Lecture:

What Mr. Milosz presents is obviously the great divide in his mind between West and East -between our 'alienated' poetry, full of introspective anxiety, and a poetry emerging under constant tyranny where 'a peculiar fusion of the individual and the historical



took place, which means that events burdening a whole community are perceived by a poet as touching him in a most personal manner. Then poetry is no longer alienated.' This may sound like a formula, and in fact it is a traditional one in Eastern Europe, where a more 'social' sense of literature (not necessarily engaged but less self-celebrating than ours) has long operated. (A.1)

The motif of the “alienation” of Western poets, and the anxiety stemming from the supposed futility of their craft, was frequently cited as the reason for the irresistible hold exerted by the Polish situation on Western imaginations. William Pfaff elaborates on the subject in his article on the dangers of politically involved writing, remarking that the notion of a poet who incorporates the roles of educator and protector of his nation “has an extreme power of attraction to artists and intellectuals in the rich countries. It appeals to their idealism, but also seems to offer a solution to their sense of isolation from the real forces at work in the world to their alienation.” (B3)

Due to the allure of this vision, Polish poets – or rather, the mythical figures that a large part of the Anglophone world had accepted as archetypal Polish poets – became more than simply a group of authors that could be discovered and digested at one’s leisure. Instead, journalists and critics alike became prone to holding them up as examples of real literary virtue, and chastising English or American writers for their failure to emulate them.

Randy Hoder of the Los Angeles Times quotes Berkeley Professor Robert Faggen, who insisted that one of the main benefits of the involvement of Miłosz in

their literature course was that students could interact with “a poet who has taken on not simply literary matters but the range of moral and spiritual problems which confront human beings.” (3.A) The criticism of local poets implied in this statement is explicit in a number of other articles. In the Washington Post, for example, David Streitfeld notes that “People read [Miłosz] who know nothing of Polish history, who find in his work a voice and authority that makes American poets seem wan and irrelevant.” (“In Praise”, X.15) Such comparisons are not limited to Miłosz, of course – authors have resorted to other writers to highlight what they identified as the shortcomings of their fellow citizens (e.g. “Averse to Fame”, Streitfeld B.1; Wojahn 14; Sherman WP.15). Indeed, and perhaps inevitably, the terms of comparison were frequently more general, as many authors in the popular media chose to contrast entire national poetries. One representative example comes in Richard Eder:

The iron ideologies of the Soviet Union, along with the real iron that enforced them, gave rise to a poetry of extraordinary amplitude. Our own non-ideological amplitude, by contrast, has tended to narrow poetry down, however accomplished. 'Truth' and 'Beauty', a century and a half after the Romantics, bear expired shelf-life labels and seem unsalable in our domestic literary market. But some Russian, Polish, and Czechoslovak poets found a special genius for making all but indistinguishable the line between the sublime and the homely, the abstract and the material. (“The Poet in the Garden”, Eder BR.7)

A particularly poignant series of articles appeared in American newspapers in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The consensus among journalists seemed to be that the plight of the victims had finally given citizens of the United States the ability to relate to, and be consoled by, the Polish poetry that their readers knew had been born in suffering. In the year in which the World Trade Center fell, Harvey Shapiro wrote in the New York Times:

[Polish poets who endured two tyrannies, Nazi and Soviet]  
 produced poetry so steeped in the terror of the 20th century as to  
 make much of the poetry then being written in the West seem  
 trivial. Recently the New Yorker concluded its special issue on the  
 destruction of the World Trade Center with a poem by Adam  
 Zagajewski - 'Try to Praise the Mutilated World' - as if America  
 were entering the nightmare of history for the first time and only a  
 Polish poet could show us the way. (BR.58)

Shapiro did not know, or chose to ignore, the fact that Zagajewski, having been born in 1945, knew nothing of World War II, and that he had moved to Paris in 1981. From the perspective of his readers, however, these biographical details did not really matter: Zagajewski was a Polish poet, and that was enough to make him eminently qualified to provide guidance in times of crisis<sup>29</sup>.

A select few reporters noted that as a consequence, some Anglophone writers displayed signs of jealousy for the good fortune Polish poets enjoyed, having been born in a country with such a wealth of factors critical for the creation of socially significant writing. In Great Britain, this was noted with considerable

alarm by Alvarez, in the Times article I have already had the opportunity to quote earlier in this chapter.

Right up until the moment when Marxism imploded and the Iron Curtain collapsed, there were writers in the West who seemed secretly to aspire to the importance suppression confers on the suppressed, believing that the situation of their colleagues further East was somehow, despite the restrictions and deprivations of their daily lives, creatively glamorous. They hankered after a society in which what they wrote was taken so seriously that it might result in persecution, jail or exile. ... Better that, they implied, than the frivolous Western democracies where anything goes and nothing matters. Even allowing for the self-serving elements in the argument - self-dramatisation, seriousness by association - it made a terrible mockery of the reality in which communist-bloc poets had to work. It is one thing to take account of the pressures they had to overcome, to give due credit to their strength, shrewdness and wit, their refusal, in the face of considerable temptation, to fake their responses and do the official right thing. But to hanker after disaster in order to authenticate or dignify your own efforts is something else entirely. (“Terror: A Muse Without Shelf Life”)

Alvarez’s text dates from 1992 – but even though he claims that the jealousy inspired by the inspiring environment Polish poets experienced ended when the “Iron Curtain collapsed”, references to similar sentiments can still be

found in much later articles, such as the 1998 New York Times feature by Martha Bayles, wherein she remembers Miłosz's lessons on the best moral stance to adopt when writing and comments as follows: "Wise words. The trouble is, deep in every poet's tender or wounded ego is a voice that whines: 'That's easy for him to say, he won the Nobel prize. Plus he got to live under Hitler and Stalin.'" (Bayles BR.31)

This phenomenon of "oppression envy" was discussed more thoroughly in academic publications, and many authors both in Great Britain and America found it strongly objectionable. Going back to Jarniewicz's "Under Eastern Eyes," one can find the following description of the situation in Britain.

Public or political themes surface rarely. In the interviews, poets complain about the atmosphere of stagnation and self-satisfaction in Britain; they observe that, in contrast to Eastern Europe or Latin America, Britain has undergone no really traumatic experience in its recent history, and (in short) that the atmosphere is sterile, and unfavourable to 'engaged' poetry. (Even accepting this dubious diagnosis, one might point out that ennui and boredom produced Les Fleurs du Mal; and the affluent and careless seventies in Poland merely caused Różewicz to attack the 'precarious normality'. Uneventful circumstances do not have to produce uneventful poetry. (97)

Both the assessment and the wry commentary are mirrored in Murphy's text, published two years after Jarniewicz's article (and thus after the regime

change in Poland). Murphy declares that American poetry has been relegated to the margins of culture already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and contrasts this state of affairs with “chestnuts about ordinary people in the Eastern bloc who care about ‘the Word,’ manuscripts passed from hand to hand, even poems preserved orally. Inevitably, the questions are revived: Where are the great American poets? Has American poetry been reduced to private confessions and personal trivia?” (162). However, like Jarniewicz, he goes a step further than most writers in the popular media, and questions what he calls the “self-serving fetishisation of totalitarianism,” the unthinking tribute to tyranny, and the automatic acceptance of the idea that life under an oppressive regime constitutes a *sine qua non* condition for relevant, socially involved verse. Furthermore, he rejects the idea that America lacks the necessary historical baggage and collective experience of misery to produce authentically engaged verse, and adds that “this interpretation avoids the obvious fact that there is a vast amount of suffering in America, from homelessness to AIDS to starvation to crime. How is it that this domestic plight, this ‘generational sediment’, does not become fossil fuel for literature?” (163). Murphy also takes issue with the logic dictating that tyranny somehow dignifies the act of writing: he protests that “if we accept that totalitarianism releases the nobility of the word, restores its attachment to reality ... then we run the risk of aestheticising all that we include within poetry – in this case, suffering” (172).

In 2003, Miller agreed that it was “fallacious to suppose that lives lived under these ‘interesting’ circumstances necessarily have more to teach us than more ‘ordinary’ lives. Between the lives and the lines, genius has intervened, a

process that can intervene in similar fashion between the most confined life and the most exalted poem. Consider Emily Dickinson” (19). He elsewhere in the article, he wonders what it was that western poets coveted so deeply. The assumption is that they were not, in fact, hankering after governmental repressions and time in prison. Instead, Miller suggests that the objects of their desire were a question of voice.

The aspect of Eastern bloc poetry most clearly enviable to the Western poet of the 1960s and 1970s was the hold it allegedly exercised over the souls of its readers ... The quality so seductively present in Eastern bloc poetry was, I suggest, affirmation. It was the ability to state positive values in a form poetically convincing. I should qualify this immediately with two points: the interest was generated by wonderful poets and the affirmation was itself paradoxical. (16, 18)

## **4.2 Resentment**

Paradoxical envy for the dire circumstances which help increase the prestige of Polish poetry among Anglophone readers can be construed as milder form of another phenomenon noticeable in the post-1990 era: a wave of resentment on the side of poets working in English, who grew tired of what they saw as the inescapable, unwinnable competition against poets who had suffered the oppression of the Eastern bloc. The media coverage bred bitterness and mistrust, which led to the questioning of the strategies used to promote Polish poetry – and of the quality of the poetry itself.

In his review of Alvarez's Faber Book of Modern European Poetry, published in the Guardian in 1992, Donald Davie criticises the editor's strong belief in the efficiency of translation, and posits that the quality of the English versions reflect the talent of the translators (whose ranks include the prominent poets Seamus Heaney and DJ Enright) more than that of the authors of the original versions. He also points out that the selection of work by certain poets limits the reader's choice to an overly restricted time frame, noting that "readers a little more conversant with Russian and Polish than with Romanian cannot fail to notice that the texts chosen for translation from Boris Pasternak in the one language, and from Czeslaw Milosz in the other, represent an arbitrarily excerpted phase (or phases) from these great poets' total oeuvres" (Davie). The implication here is that while the poets may well have written great poems, there is no guarantee that the best known works, the anthology pieces, are representative of their entire body of work, and that they remained consistently excellent throughout their careers. This suspicion is voiced more explicitly, if by proxy, in a statement Murphy makes during his 1996 interview with Szymborska for the Los Angeles Times: "Some critics have noted that totalitarianism inspired great literature in Eastern Europe, but democracy has not." ("Creating a Universal Poetry" 3).

As time passed, more and more indications that the figure of the dissident was falling out of grace could be found in various publications. They often appeared under the guise of a compliment towards a poet less burdened by history such as this remark about Zagajewski taken from a 2004 issue of the Guardian: "With a sensibility damaged by history, a political conscience deformed by



totalitarianism, a mind deeply affected by his study of philosophy, it would be easy to imagine Zagajewski writing veiled protest poetry (which he did in his youth) or poems entirely private and runic, bitter in tone and indecipherable in content, or even descending into shrill silence” (Tóibín 35). Praise for Zagajewski, to be sure, but this sentence can easily be read as a commentary on the weariness of readers with the prolonged exposure to poetic activism.

## 5. CONCLUSION

I hope I have been able to show Polish poetry has been present in the minds of academics and critics as well as journalists and non-specialist writers from 1980 to the present. It captivated readers’ imaginations due to the political turmoil Poland went through in the early 80s, and became synonymous with a noble resistance against oppressive governments. However, even though its reputation seemed unimpeachable, it tended to be appreciated more for its function (and to a lesser extent, the themes with which it dealt) than for its artistic value. Furthermore, the style of reporting homogenized the scene, and only very few writers reported on the multiplicity of poetic voices present in Poland before and after the change of regime – and even then, they were academics, whose papers published in specialised journals only reached a very limited audience. Consequently, the otherwise providential move from communism to democracy gave rise to two separate, but co-existing, reactions: a sharp decline in interest, due to the disappearance of the main selling point of Polish poetry; or a stubborn reiterating of old talking points, which grew more and more detached from the

actual state of new Polish poetry. In the next chapter, I will try to ascertain how this state of affairs was reflected in anthologies of Polish poetry in English translation.

## CHAPTER 4: THE PARATEXT OF ANTHOLOGIES

### 1. BEFORE THE CHANGE

#### 1.1 Making the Books

##### 1.1.1 Intentions

In the context of the situation in Poland in the early 80s, and the general perception of Polish literature as a tool for dissent and rebellion, the fact that the first two of the anthologies published in that period appear to have been the expression of an almost purely political thought seems only logical<sup>30</sup>. A case in point: Antony Graham, the translator of Witness Out of Silence, included in his foreword the following description of life in totalitarian Poland:

Living in an atmosphere of hypocrisy, lies, and compromise, listening to official double-talk, being forced to accept conditions imposed by a whole range of potential sanctions ... all these factors can arguably bring about opportunism, cynicism and self-degradation. Hence, some think, it is time to stand up and be counted, to break the silence and prevent moral atrophy. (12)

In other words, the book was designed to honour the courageous individuals finally speaking out in a stillness enforced through fear and repression, and to amplify their voices: a means to show that there are still some who have not conceded defeat. The sides of the conflict are clearly defined, and the stakes are nothing less than the moral rectitude of an entire country. In that aspect, at least,

Witness Out of Silence is as close as possible to the popular representation of the Polish poet as the hallowed protector of a broken, subjugated society.

Despite the power and simplicity of this enduring image, the political intentions behind books of Polish poetry could also be more layered. Humps & Wings is another anthology from this decade with politics at its source. However, the number of people and discrete agendas involved in its creation makes its analysis a more complex task than the straightforward patriotism of Witness Out of Silence. The first source of information on the subject, Paul Vangelisti, explains in his foreword that a fortuitous encounter between him and Jan Sawka, a Polish illustrator fascinated with poetry, led to a collaboration on some of Vangelisti's poems and their translation into Polish, and thus, indirectly, to the publication of Humps & Wings. The initial impulse for the creation of the book came from Sawka. The foreword depicts Vangelisti's role as limited almost exclusively to that of a facilitator: even though he had lived in Poland for a while, and indeed had by then already edited an anthology of Polish poetry<sup>31</sup>, he maintains that this second collection came to him in the form of a finished manuscript, with the poems already selected, ordered and translated.

However, a telephone interview with Vangelisti yielded a crop of new information, not included in the anthology and not readily available in any printed source. During his stay in Poland in the late 70s, Vangelisti met Barańczak clandestinely, and obtained a first manuscript of an anthology of contemporary Polish poetry from him. Vangelisti smuggled it out of the country taped to his leg. A long period of editing followed, with much mailing of documents between

California and Poland, with London-based Nyczek acting as intermediary.

Numerous problems arose, not least because the pair of American editors found themselves modifying the British English of the translations for the US market, without access to the originals. Thus, while the final selection of translated texts was indeed sent to them by Nyczek, they modified the texts considerably more than the introduction suggests – and, importantly, the real creator of the anthology is never given credit for his work.

Whether one knows only the published scenario or the more revealing story as related by one of the book's creators, there can be little doubt that the drive to create it had an external origin, which complicates the status of the anthology considerably. The image of Polish poetry it represents came from within Poland: the book can be viewed as a snapshot of the Polish scene taken by and insider, the eminent poet and activist, Stanisław Barańczak, with the intention of broadcasting it to the West. While they had their own political reasons for bringing Polish poetry to the United States, Vangelisti and McBride decided not to create their own book to fulfil the function they perceived as necessary. Instead, they chose disseminate a representation of Polish poetry as seen by a particular Pole, altering his message to suit their own goals by contextualising the book. Even though Barańczak's name appears nowhere in the book, his role in the making of Humps & Wings remains pivotal, as his involvement with Nowa Fala, combined with clearly formulated aesthetic and moral preferences, could not fail to inform the book as a whole. There are thus several layers of intention at play here: the explicit goal of the editors to promote Polish poetry; the hidden political

and aesthetic agenda of Barańczak, and the openly stated convictions of Nyczek, who wrote the introduction; and finally, a thinly veiled appropriation of the Polish conflict as a parable for American issues.

Meanwhile, Miłosz adopts another register when explaining his decision to publish a collection of Polish poems: he gives his rejection of “poetry which indulges in negation and in a sterile anger at the world” as his primary motive. He believes that individuals need not capitulate in the face of phenomena seemingly beyond their influence; instead, he argues, the key is to adopt a broader perspective, and treat such instances as opportunities for growth. Polish poetry, he contends, exemplifies this approach perfectly: “a historical steamroller has gone several times through a country whose geographical location, between Germany and Russia, is not particularly enviable” (*Postwar Polish Poetry* xi). The book is thus a sort of manifesto, an attempt to showcase an alternative perspective on life, fate, and art.

This aesthetic and moral argument comes from the original preface, written in 1965; significantly, by the time of its reissue in 1983, another explanation for the book’s existence was appended to the first. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Miłosz recognises that his collection is being used as a textbook, and it is precisely this function, not the artistic programme described above, that the Nobel Prize winner uses to justify a new printing (*Postwar Polish Poetry* ix). Thus, although *Postwar Polish Poetry* may have begun purely as a refusal to succumb to nihilism and fruitless rage, with time it assumed the position of an academically sanctioned source of knowledge.

Similarly, the editors of Ariadne's Thread display a need to educate with the urge to share the literary achievements of Polish poets with the world. However, the process that combined these two desires in this collection's case was the reverse of the one described by Milosz. In fact, Kuhiwczak and Bassnett set out to educate Anglophone readers, aiming initially to compile a general book of Polish poetry, hoping that "this process of sharing will make the white space of Poland a little more colourful and delineate more sharply the lines blurred by the bias of history." (xii). However, during their initial work on selecting and translating poems for their book, they found that "the women seemed ... to have an energy and an immediacy that captured and held our imagination as readers." (x) Thus, another reason for creating the collection came into being: to showcase the unique traits of Polish women's poetry, a double narrowing that added a layer of purely aesthetic and stylistic concern to a project which had begun as a broad work of literary history, meant to educate Anglophone readers.

The decade's final anthology, The Burning Forest, stands apart from the other four volumes. Czerniawski introduces the book with a lengthy essay on Polish poetry, but while he lists its many qualities, he never formulates specific reasons as to why he felt there was a need for such a collection on the British market. Instead, he dwells on what he considers to be the essentially Polish romantic approach to poetry, and repeatedly warns the reader that the book consists of his own selection of personal favourites. When asked directly about the book's origins in an email interview, he responded as follows:

You assume a wrong sequence of events, namely that the idea of the anthology preceded the translations. In fact, I had started translating Polish poetry at school, some decades earlier. The anthology is made up of the poems I had translated until then. ... The anthology was my idea and it could not have been otherwise. As far as I am concerned, poetry translation is an extension of my own freely, voluntarily written poetry. ... Consequently, the end result is not a beautifully rounded canon that everyone can approve and admire, but the product of one person's capabilities and sensibilities. (Czerniawski interview)

Czerniawski added that he thought it “shocking and incomprehensible that so many seemingly intelligent and sensitive people, even some publishers, poets and translators among them, assume that one can order poetry translations the way one can order a sack of potatoes.” (Czerniawski interview) He plainly exhibits the same romantic passion for poetry that he has himself described as a common Polish trait; in his eyes, The Burning Forest is simply a manifestation of his admiration for Polish verse expressed through translation. While there is no denying that the anthology has both an educative function and a political one, they have to be treated as incidental rather than defining features of the book.

A progression of sorts can thus be traced through the decade, with the first two books primarily political, the next two intended as educational aids and showcases of Polish writing, and the final one an expression of personal passion and preferences. At first glance, this seems to coincide neatly with the slow



collapse of the communist government in the same period, but this might be too easy a conclusion. In fact, politics occupied an equally prominent place in the minds of Poles in 1989 as they did in 1980, with fears and hopes accompanying the momentous changes in the country's government – this apparent movement away from the political was in no way a reflection of the prevailing attitudes of the general public. I have shown in Chapter 2, however, that Polish poetry did evolve. In order to ascertain whether the anthologies moved with the times, it is necessary to look at the poets and poems they contain, beginning with the selection criteria chosen by their editors.

### **1.1.2 Selecting the texts: goals and criteria**

In his Foreword, Antony Graham discusses his three principal selection criteria at some length. Subject matter is given pride of place: Graham explains that he specifically sought out poems addressing the issue of “freedom of conscience, freedom of expression” (Witness Out of Silence 11). This assertion is reflected in the book's title, and identifies the book's nature as political, awareness-raising, and full of urgency. The second criterion is a recent date of appearance: only verse published in the second half of the 70s was taken into consideration. While opting for this particular period may at first seem to be simply a result of the need for novelty so common among anthologists, readers acquainted with recent Polish history will realise the politicising impact the events of March 1976 have had on literary expression (see Chapter 2). In addition, the timeframe is likely to render the first criterion easier to satisfy, by validating the

editor's choice through showing a considerable wealth of source material. The third and final desirable feature Graham looked for in the poems he selected was translatability. Almost every anthologist references this concept, but its interpretations vary wildly. The value is thus in finding the definition of translatability, rather than in its mere presence as a condition for inclusion, and tellingly, Graham's understanding of the concept revolves around the notion of textual self-sufficiency: for him, a poem can be described as translatable providing it does not require "annotations, explanatory remarks and similar aids." (Witness Out of Silence 12).

As for Humps & Wings, the book came to its American editors as a finished manuscript. However, Vangelisti's *Introduction* informs readers that the collection's editor and his colleague were not entirely without influence on its final structure. Vangelisti states that a number of changes of limited scope were made in consultation with the other series editor, John McBride: in the penultimate sentence of his introduction, he explains that they "had to drop some few poems which, for formal or contextual reasons, might confuse readers unfamiliar with Polish literature and history." (Humps & Wings 5) While the disclosure that some unspecified pieces had been discarded with the reading public in mind indicates a measure of editorial tampering, the specific criteria for rejection remain vague, and no examples or explanations are offered. McBride adopts a similar tone in his "Postscript", where he writes:

Humps & Wings came to us whole – already translated and lacking the original text. Our polishings have been minor – a word here and

there; a reduction of the notes to the minimum necessary to understand the references of these poems. Poems of a time and place, they persist. (77)

His approach thus appears to be roughly similar to Vangelisti's, although he does admit to some undisclosed textual manipulation, while implying that the endnotes were also the work of the Polish compilers. Despite those differences, the two quotations above reveal that the primary concern shared by both editors was comprehensibility.

The similarities in the selection criteria exhibited in Witness Out of Silence and Humps & Wings, and the fact that they are made clear to readers openly, have analogous consequences for the poetry contained in both collections. Graham's definition of translatability is built on the same idea as Vangelisti's and McBride's editorial work: sparing readers confusion or misunderstandings. It is important to note that in both cases, this emphasis on ease of access is counterbalanced with a nearly complete lack of reference to poetics. Assuring readers that only those poems have been selected which they can easily comprehend encourages trust, and elevates the translations to a status equal to that of originals; even more importantly, the failure to address the poetic qualities of the texts suggests strongly that in the case of this poetry, subject matter takes clear precedence over aesthetics, which in turn casts them as objects defined, first and foremost, by their function, and brings the poems closer to the category of message than to that of art.

Presenting one's anthology as a necessarily fragmented reflection of an individual's understanding of what constitutes superior poetry is a common tactic among anthologists. Accordingly, in the preface to the first edition, reprinted in the third, Miłosz goes to some length to underline the fractional character of his book. "The anthology is not conceived as an 'image' of contemporary Polish poetry. To make such a claim one would have to allot space to every single poet of talent, a task I found impossible." (Postwar Polish Poetry xi) While Miłosz lists translatability as the main determinant for inclusion or exclusion of writers and texts, unlike Graham, Vangelisti and McBride, his understanding of the concept has little to do with accessibility and comprehensibility: he notes instead that many of those poets whose work he omitted were "fine craftsmen", whose masterful use of traditional poetic devices such as the "Polish syllabotonic verse" could not be rendered in English (Postwar Polish Poetry xi-xii). This is in marked contrast to the definitions of translatability described above, and denotes an importance attached to poetics which was missing from the two earlier volumes.

In an even more pronounced departure from the values espoused by the editors of the two previous books, Miłosz proclaims that "poems were judged on merit alone," and claims not to have taken into consideration "the views of their authors or their political status." In addition, he felt it necessary to stress that the poets' place of residence was not a factor in his decisions; he notes that since Polish poets have been influencing each other across borders, they can be considered as members of the same literary community whether they write from within Poland or not. (Postwar Polish Poetry xii) Thus, he elevates literary quality

to the status of the sole factor determining whether a text is worthy to be immortalised in the collection.

However, the “Preface” also contains elements which hint that Miłosz has been much more sensitive to politics than he is willing to admit. For instance, his note about including emigrant writers unquestionably has political significance, given the number of dissident poets forced into an unwilling emigration by the government. Miłosz may also have felt obligated to make this observation due to the fact that by the time when the third edition of his anthology was published, he himself had been living abroad for twenty-three years; however, there can be little doubt that his decision to include poets writing from abroad would not sit well with the censor’s bureau had the book been submitted for publication in Poland.

More arguments for a political interpretation of Miłosz’s stance can be found in the description of his chosen period: he notes that with some exceptions, he limited his pool of poets to those still alive at the time of selection, and to poems published after the collapse of the “absurd doctrines” of 1956. The choice of the strongly pejorative adjective implies an emotional stance that cannot have been without consequences for the selection of poems, despite protestations to the contrary. And indeed, in his brief “Preface to the Third Edition”, Miłosz openly acknowledges the influence of history on poetry, stating that poetry is “by nature a rebellious force”, and implying that new developments on the poetic scene were inextricably connected to the ebb and flow of the battles fought on the political scene. “The victory of Solidarity in August 1980 opened, for a short time,

completely new vistas. The coup of December 1981 closed that chapter” (Postwar Polish Poetry ix).

This more recent preface also contains a paragraph wherein Miłosz seemingly distances himself even further from the responsibility of a canon-maker. He reiterates his reasoning attributing the ultimate selection of texts to their level of translatability, and adds: “the anthology is not meant to rank the relative merit of authors by allotting them more or less space. Translatability and the editor’s whim were more decisive. That whimsical character of the whole is even more pronounced in this edition, and I readily accept the reproach of arbitrariness” (Postwar Polish Poetry ix). However, looking at the changes Miłosz introduced, one finds it hard not to see, in his amendments to the selection, patterns motivated by more than the poets’ mastery of their art. Szymborska is a good example: the first two editions, coinciding more or less with her brief fascination with communism, only contain one of her poems. By 1983, Szymborska had severed all ties with the ruling party, and her section of the book grew to a total of eight texts. Miłosz, however, explains only that the accusations of preciosity he had levelled against her work in earlier editions are not relevant to much of her later work (Postwar Polish Poetry 109). Despite the undeniable political undercurrent to Miłosz’s selection, the overtly stated criteria focus primarily on the poetic qualities of the collected poems.

The “editor’s whim” rises to even greater importance in Ariadne’s Thread . I have already noted briefly how the editors came to limit the scope of their book to women poets, but of course their selection had to be narrowed considerably

more, as the body from which they were choosing was still very wide indeed.

Bassnett and Kuhiwczak decry the fact that the collection is smaller than it could be: “A collection like this,” they warn, “is necessarily the tip of an iceberg.”

(Ariadne’s Thread xii) They also allude to problems with space and limited funding as a reason for the book’s relatively narrow scope (xi). Because of these constraints, they explain, their choices became personal, with poems selected due to the appeal they exerted over Bassnett and Kuhiwczak as readers and translators. The editors define this appeal as “an energy and immediacy that held [their] imagination as readers.” (Ariadne’s Thread x); as in Miłosz’s case, this is a movement away from focusing on accessibility and, with the emphasis shifting instead to the emotional dimension of the poetry and its effect on the reading public.

In addition, like Miłosz, Bassnett and Kuhiwczak claim that the authors’ and texts’ respective places in the canon of Polish literature were not taken into consideration, and qualify their selection as personal. In fact, the editors specifically note that “there may be those who feel that we should have paid attention to canons of literary greatness, rather than to reliance on personal taste. But we believe that the function of poetry is that of sharing experience.”

(Ariadne’s Thread xii) It is true that out of the eight poets featured, only three had had their poetry published in an English-language book before: Urszula Koziół, Anna Świrszczyńska and Wisława Szymborska all had poems in Postwar Polish Poetry, although there is no overlap when it comes to text selection. The remaining five are indubitably fixtures of the canon of Polish poetry, however;

Bassnett and Kuhiwczak's reservations may therefore be understood as pertaining to the Anglophone canon of Polish poetry.

As for Czerniawski, he attempts to combine the criteria of intelligibility to non-Polish readers and artistic value. Explaining how he chose the poems included in The Burning Forest, he predictably referred to the familiar concept of translatability: "Any anthology of translated poetry is always distorted by having to exclude the untranslatable, and the untranslatable is often the best, or even, some may say, is always the best." (The Burning Forest 20) As was the case with Miłosz and the editors of Ariadne's Thread, Czerniawski's understanding of the term hinges on literary conditions. He qualifies the statement quoted above by noting that the poems that translate best often employ a thrifty idiom, which can be easily moved to another language; and so, he argues, "...pre-modern poets ... translate badly because they operate in a highly rhetorical mode which it is very difficult to render credible in English." (The Burning Forest 20) An extension of this philosophy is his belief that alongside inaccessible rhetoric, another element that should be avoided is cultural opacity. "It is a common feature of the poems included here," he professes, "that they either place their Polishness in a wider context or avoid it altogether." (The Burning Forest 20)

This last statement may appear somewhat reminiscent of the attempts to reassure an Anglophone readership undertaken both by Graham and by the editors of Humps & Wings; one could interpret it as concern over alienating readers with poems too deeply rooted in the Polish language and culture. However, Czerniawski is quick to stress that following these guidelines is not tantamount to



making compromises when it comes to literary quality. Instead, he chooses to emphasise that he simply collected those poems which he personally found possible to render in English in a satisfactory manner. “If this anthology is circumscribed by what one particular translator has found it possible to translate, this should not be seen as a wholly negative principle of selection. ... In this search for the translatable I became convinced that I was simply looking for good poems.” (The Burning Forest 20) Coupled with Czerniawski’s conviction that austere poetry is by necessity easier to translate, this fragment becomes more than just a translator’s defence: instead, it turns into an aesthetic pronouncement, a preference for an asceticism which imbues texts with a more universal appeal.

There is, however, one particular aspect of Czerniawski’s selection, which would likely puzzle readers familiar with the literary scene of the time: the absence of poems by Czesław Miłosz, a relatively recent Nobel Prize winner, and one of the very few figures in the world of Polish letters likely to be familiar to Anglophone poetry readers. In his email interview, Czerniawski disclosed factors which influenced his selection, but which he was unwilling to state publicly in his book. When asked whether there had been “any attempts to externally influence [his] choice of poets/poems”, and whether “the publisher tried to modify [his] plans in any way”, he answered

[Neil Astley, head of Bloodaxe Books] wanted Miłosz to be included. As I explain above, I don’t do poetry translations to order. But moreover, as it happens, Miłosz had restricted the right to translate his poetry to a few selected people, and threatened legal

action against those not authorised. I'm happy to state that I was not one of the privileged. (Czerniawski interview)

This remark constitutes a valuable source of insight, as it showcases a predictable attempt from the publisher to include a name which might attract a greater number of readers, as well as a rare instance in which a poet limits the number of translators allowed to work on his verse. In addition, Czerniawski's tone suggests a negative opinion of Miłosz, one which may well have excluded his verse from the anthology in any case. This rare insight into the unpublished backstory of an anthology serves to prove that beyond the officially stated reasons for compiling books often lies a multitude of grievances and personal likes and dislikes, hidden from the casual reader but just as influential as other, more lofty considerations.

Thus, the selection criteria divide the five anthologies along lines similar to those already described when looking at the motives behind the publication of the collections. The two politically inclined collections prioritise topicality and ease of access, while those who would educate and showcase the best writing protest that personal taste was the prime factor. Even those have been influenced by politics, however, both in the meaning of national power struggles and petty personal aversions<sup>32</sup>. Indeed, introductions and prefaces do not constitute the most reliable source of knowledge about selection criteria. Comparing the editors' statements with the selections themselves yields more dependable information.

## 1.2 Translation-related Paratext

Every anthology of Polish poetry published in this decade is the result of the work of a single translator or pair of translators working as a team. Miłosz's book, which features a very few translations by others, is the sole exception, and even then only to a negligible degree. In all five cases, the translators also acted as editors, although Barańczak's role in the creation of Humps & Wings was hidden from the casual observers. Their ideas on the translation of poetry, ranging from "entirely unfeasible" to "mystically successful", have thus informed both the selection and the presentation of the texts – using their status as rewritings to further their varied agendas. Their views on importing poems into a new language ranged from an utter disbelief in the efficiency of the practice, through personal hit-and-miss approaches used as justifications for non-canonical choices, to a nearly mystical method of disseminating the true spirit of a poem.

### 1.2.1 Translation as an Impossibility

As established in Chapter 1, resigning oneself to the impossibility of literary translation can be a valid approach – one which Witness Out of Silence illustrates well. In his introduction, Spender refrains from commenting on the artistic value of the book's poems. The reason for this disinclination is revealed in the concluding paragraph:

It is difficult for an English reader to judge Polish poems in translation. It is therefore hard to say that English poets and readers of poetry have a duty to read these poems because they express the situation of poetry in Poland, which is also,

in the works of these poets, to some extent the situation of humanity throughout the world. But I appeal to my colleagues the poets and the readers of poetry to do so. (Spender 10)

Spender seems to assume that the poems' linguistic uprooting prevents them from "[expressing] the situation of poetry in Poland"; he does attempt to represent the poems as universally relevant, but although the word "duty" would fit well with the general tone of his introductions, he is reluctant to use it. Instead, he acknowledges that Poles are fighting an overwhelmingly powerful enemy with their words. His position, however, is that foreigners cannot learn from Polish writers, because their situation is radically different and their words come to foreign ears distorted by translation; but striving towards achieving some level of understanding is worth the effort. The effectiveness of translation is, in fact, discounted even by the book's translator himself. Graham sees it as an activity doomed to fail, justified only in the case of a little-known language like Polish. He maintains that translation can, however, help Polish poetry accomplish its twin mission of witness and what he vaguely refers to as providing abstract "practical value" for the readers.

### **1.2.2 Translatability as a Selection Criterion**

Postwar Polish Poetry constitutes a prime example of what is perhaps the most popular approach: translatability as a selection criterion. I have noted before that Miłosz makes the usual apologies for not producing a representative book in his preface; to be precise, he states that he has found including every talented poet

impossible: “generally speaking, adaptability to English determined to a large extent the number of poems each writer has been allotted.” (xii) Syllabotonic verse, a feature of traditional Polish meter, is listed as particularly difficult to render<sup>33</sup>, and Miłosz identifies this difficulty as the principal reason for a certain “distortion of perspective” (xii) to be found in his book. Later in the text, he uses the same argument to pre-emptively placate poets who might feel slighted by being only modestly represented: “I hope my fellow poets will not hold a grudge against me for not giving some of them a more prominent place. Translations should at least be adequate, and it is better not to attempt what cannot be done.” (xiii-xiv)

Perhaps due to its author’s passionate stance on the subject of literary translation, the introduction to The Burning Forest includes a detailed account of Czerniawski’s thoughts on the issue. He begins with the common reservation and acknowledges that the anthology “distorted by having to exclude the untranslatable” (20), and states that oftentimes the very best poems are the ones that resist translation. However, it is not the quality of the poetry as such which constitutes the obstacle; the problem stems the twin sources of discourse and cultural differences. Thus, Czerniawski argues that Polish poets up to and including the Romantics cannot be translated to English due to their high rhetoric style and a narrow focus on specifically Polish issues. His solution is to turn to writers whose style lends itself more to a rendition in another language: and so, he chooses the “harsh and elliptical” Norwid, “naked” Różewicz & Bursa, “open, declarative” Barańczak and Krynicki (20). As for specific texts, he has tried to

find poems “that either place their Polishness in a wider context or avoid it altogether.” (20)

Czerniawski goes as far as to equate a poem’s translatability with its quality – he dismisses entirely untranslatable poems as pure form, deprived of meaning. The translator should be able to select one layer, and transpose it to the target language, relying on its own complexity to create new “penumbras of meaning.” (21) In other words, the only truly untranslatable poems are those in which the meaning is too diluted to pinpoint. In an apparently self-contradictory move, however, Czerniawski stresses later in the same text that some of the poems he had to omit were not discarded simply as “meaningless verbiage”; instead, he found them to be so deeply rooted in the “genius of the Polish language” that any rendering would be more version than translation; he puts Słowacki and Przyboś in this category.

### **1.2.3 Translation as “Hope for the Future”**

Despite Czerniawski’s strong opinions on the subject of translation, Ariadne’s Thread is the only 80s anthology to boast a separate translators’ preface. More manifesto than chronicle, however, the text has relatively little to say about the poems as such, in that it does not discuss specific problems and solutions. Instead, it focuses on the new understanding of poetry translation that the anthologists have found while working on their book, and the strategies they chose to employ. Still, there is a number of ways in which the preface indirectly affects the overall tone of the book.

In the first paragraph, the authors are introduced as a duo of top experts in the field, each of them a native speaker in one of the two pertinent languages, with the English speaker an established, published poet. And yet, the assertion that “Susan Bassnett had been writing and publishing her own poetry for some years and therefore had a sense of what would and would not work in English as a poem” (xiii) may well lead to questions about the risk of over-domestication. The introduction gave readers the impression that Polish poems follow somewhat different patterns than similar English texts. Indeed, the editors counted educating readers on the uniqueness of Polish culture among their goals, and it would seem that bending texts to fit accepted norms of poetic writing in the target language would strip them of their idiosyncrasies.

The translators argued, however, that the opposite phenomenon happened: despite her lack of in-depth knowledge of the originals, Bassnett’s editing work frequently altered the text to more closely mirror the structure of the original, even in those cases where Kuhiwczak had attempted, in his first draft, to rearrange words and phrases in accordance with the rules of English syntax. “Whilst Piotr carefully transformed the language into familiar structures and patterns, Susan then carefully defamiliarized it.” (xiv) This self-righting tendency led the authors of Ariadne’s Thread to an optimistic observation:

The conclusion that we came to through the lengthy process of translating the poems in this way is that the particular qualities of language that made these poems work in Polish somehow struggled through into English, despite the huge differences in syntactical and

semantic order between the two languages. In short, that their poeticity, if we can use such a term, crossed the boundary of language. If this is indeed the case, we see it as an immensely positive sign of great hope for the future; politicians may stockpile nuclear weapons, but the voice of the poet speaks out to us all. (xiv)

These concluding remarks perform two functions. First, they promise readers translations that recreate the important features of the poems almost supernaturally. This could potentially counter the effect of the inclusion of a translators' preface, which tends to remind readers that they are holding a collection of rewritings, by bolstering their confidence in the closeness of the anglicized versions to the poetic core of the originals. Second, the last sentence – also the last sentence of the preface – returns to the enduring narrative of poetry as a force capable of standing up to the challenges set before it by bellicose politicians. However, this is presented as a universal experience, rather than a specifically Polish trait, again comforting readers and reinforcing their conviction that even though they come from another culture, they can fully appreciate the poetry created by Polish women poets, as it addresses issues pertinent to humanity in general.

### **1.3 Selling the Books**

For the translation process to be complete, however, the texts must be read by members of the public. Perhaps the most effective contextualising tools are those employed to market the anthologies to potential readers: titles, primarily, but



also cover notes, blurbs, endorsements, and the like. Some openly reference Poland's grand narrative of oppression, either trying to draw attention to it even before the book is read or subverting it for their own purposes; some feature subtler indications as to the nature of the content, with literary allusions and attempts to establish cultural common ground.

### **1.3.1 The Narrative of Oppression**

Witness Out of Silence: Polish Poets Fighting for Freedom constitutes a good example of the first approach. Its title leaves little to the imagination. The first word, "witness", carries strong connotations: it denotes a momentous event, of a hurtful or destructive nature, observed by a bystander. Even readers unfamiliar with the expression "poetry of witness" are likely to derive a sense of urgency and alarm from the title. For those acquainted with this type of verse, however, the word resonates with the familiar phrase, and acts as shorthand for socially, ethically, and morally engaged verse reacting to a reality of oppression. In addition, the title describes the witnesses as speaking "out of silence" –this idea of stillness, with the implication lack of voices willing to speak out, imbues the mystery and lack of accessibility usually associated with Poland overtones of coercion and subjugation. These three words stress the rarity of any communication from the Eastern bloc, and in conjunction with the term "witness" create the impression of a crime surrounded by a conspiracy of silence.

If the main title denotes cruelty and subjugation, the subtitle provides a sense of their scale and pathos: the issue at stake seems to be nothing less than the

freedom of an entire nation, and the witnesses leading the fight are its poets. As I have shown in Chapter 3, this reflects accurately the vision of Poland a member of the general public could be expected to have in the early Eighties. The title advertises a firm intent to expose the injustice and terror inherent in the Polish situation at the time, stemming from a deep-seated need of the book's creators, Polish exiles and émigrés, to somehow aid their struggling compatriots; it suggests a genuine passion for the cause, rather than an example of exploitation of a popular theme in an effort to boost sales. Furthermore, both parts focus on the persona of the authors, rather than on the text. "Witness" and "poets" are both nouns denoting people. This wording puts the focus firmly on the poets, effectively introducing the anthology as a collection of characters rather than poems.

The complete lack of cover notes, or indeed any information other than the title, subtitle, and the name of the introduction's author, is also significant. Such an austere presentation can be interpreted twofold: either the book was intended to sell on strength of the subject matter alone, aided by the patronage of a famous poet, or the publisher lacked commercial aspirations. Witness Out of Silence seems to be a book which was to be sought out by those already interested in the topic, not picked up at a bookstore by a browser.

Unlike Witness Out of Silence, The Burning Forest: Modern Polish Poetry boasts a cryptic main title appended with an explanatory, if general, subtitle. The tone here is unequivocally dramatic: the image of a forest fire, supported by the cover illustration of animals fleeing a blaze, brings to mind a terrifying natural

disaster, nearly impossible to contain. In fact, the phrase is a reference to a line by one of the great figures of Polish romanticism, Juliusz Słowacki: “No time to mourn roses, when forests burn.” The quotation is included in the book as an epigraph, and its position at the front, before the acknowledgments, before the index, helps set the tone for the volume. Słowacki’s aphoristic line constitutes more than just an artistic manifesto – it can be read as a moral problem, with time spent on “roses,” the unnecessary embellishments and flourishes, depicted as a foolish waste of resources in the face of disaster.

Meanwhile, Humps & Wings: Polish Poetry Since '68 suggests otherwise. The main title may seem enigmatic at first, but a closer reading reveals implications of a doppelganger-like relationship between handicaps and assets: while a hump is a hindrance, a burden, wings symbolise flight, escape, and freedom. Their direct juxtaposition in the title suggests one can be mistaken for the other, and that what appears to be a drawback at first glance may well turn out to be an advantage. Further parallels can be drawn between this image and the Polish situation, with the “hump”, an oppressive political regime, paradoxically inspiring and motivating poets – giving them “wings”. The cover illustration by Jan Sawka, a worker’s overalls sprouting moth-like wings from the back, support supports this interpretation by imbuing a staple of communist iconography with a surreal, poetic, and ultimately hopeful quality.

In the case of Postwar Polish Poetry, the main title seems to perform a simple, descriptive function, the artful alliteration notwithstanding; however, the decision to reference the Second World War when defining the contents serves to

emphasise the close link between Polish literature and dark historical events. This is in keeping with the grand narrative of Poland the eternally oppressed, a country defined by its many wars and conflict. Miłosz himself encouraged this very interpretation in his introduction to the 1983 edition of his collection. In addition, the book's publishers pinned their hopes on Miłosz's vastly increased popularity as a Nobel Prize winner to market this third edition of the anthology; in this context, the choice of title echoes Miłosz's strong ideas on the position of literature in history, which he presented in his Nobel Lecture, and which subsequently received extensive newspaper coverage. Addressing the assembly, Miłosz extolled the keener sense of history he saw in Eastern Europeans:

During the thirty years I have spent abroad I have felt I was more privileged than my Western colleagues, whether writers or teachers of literature, for events both recent and long past took in my mind a sharply delineated, precise form. Western audiences confronted with poems or novels written in Poland, Czechoslovakia or Hungary, or with films produced there, possibly intuit a similarly sharpened consciousness, in a constant struggle against limitations imposed by censorship. Memory thus is our force, it protects us against a speech entwining upon itself like the ivy when it does not find a support on a tree or a wall. (Miłosz, "Nobel Lecture")

The back cover, meanwhile, features a quote from prominent English poet, critic, and editor Al Alvarez, which reflects the attitude towards Polish poetry prevalent in the 80s. Alvarez begins by summarising Polish history, with its "200

years' experience of occupation" and the resulting "genius for independence of mind in intolerable circumstances." The resulting poetry, he explains, while ironic, intellectual and impassive, is also inevitably involved with affairs of state, a paradox by Anglophone standards in those days. In fact, he goes so far as to state that viewed through Polish eyes, "every feeling, every gesture, every word, however personal, has its political resonance." Implicitly, the tragedy of Polish history is thus parlayed into an asset, a hoard of collective experience enabling poets to write politically relevant verse without compromising their artistic integrity. It is represented, however, as an exclusively Polish capability, unobtainable for those who have no direct share in the country's troubled history.

### **1.3.2 Cultural Common Ground**

As noted before, some of the editors make a conscious effort to explain the relevance of Polish poetry to non-Poles; and the strategies used by anthologists in this decade involve representing Polish culture as connected to the very generally defined European tradition, and extending the patronage of Western institutions and figures of note over the imported poems.

Indeed, this decade featured two interesting examples of references to shared cultural heritage used for marketing purposes, one overt, the other more subtle and complex. The first is Ariadne's Thread: whose title references a well-known Greek myth, while it gives relatively little indication of the content, it does reference a woman finding a solution to a problem, leading the way through a maze where traditional male solutions have failed over and over. If the widespread

knowledge of the myth makes it likely for readers to get the reference, it can also devalue its impact and yet, this familiarity is likely to have been an intended effect. As a recognisable cultural reference<sup>34</sup>, it counterbalances the obscure and narrow area covered by the book.

The second book employing a similar tactic is Humps & Wings: Polish Poetry Since '68. Its subtitle identifies the anthology's subject matter as "Polish poetry", but more importantly in this context, appends a significant date to this announcement: the year 1968. 1968 was a time of agitation and civic unrest in both Poland and the US: while the reasons for the social upheavals in the two countries were radically different, the common factor of a grassroots rebellion against authorities remains. This reference can thus increase the perceived relevance of the book to US readers, by alluding to a historically significant date in the very title. It should be noted that in the United States, the unrest was caused by the adherence of many students to the new left. Accordingly, the above-mentioned associations also play into the editors' politics, and can be seen as the first element of their serious attempt to present Polish poetry as a valid lesson in cultural politics for Americans.

The importance of individual patronage should also be noted. At the top of the front cover of Postwar Polish Poetry, a note touts the book as "an anthology selected and edited by Czeslaw Milosz (sic)", with the poet's name and surname written in a large, bold typeface, albeit without Polish diacritical marks; indeed, the words "Czeslaw Milosz" constitute by far the most prominent element on the front cover, printed as they are in lettering roughly twice the size of the title. In the

two previous editions of the book, published in 1965 and 1970 respectively, the cover designs did not put the poet's name in positions as prominent as this one; one can safely assume that in the 1983 printing, the publishing house decided to capitalize on his relatively fresh Nobel prize fame. In addition, on the back cover, Alvarez further reassures readers by stating that "Professor Miłosz's translations are correspondingly impeccable." The endorsement by such an important British literary figure, coupled with the profusion of Miłosz's academic qualifications, further reinforces the Nobel Prize-winning poet's patronage, and makes it very unlikely for a reader to question the selection or wonder about textual changes resulting from the process translation. Thus, already at this stage, the collection is established as a highly canonizing work.

Witness Out of Silence is another prime example of individual patronage. In fact, the strength of the patron's support appears to have been assessed as the main selling point of the book, with Stephen Spender the only contributor mentioned by name on the cover, even though his role was limited to writing an introduction. In a book featuring largely unknown Polish poets and a relatively little known translator, Spender's was the only name likely to be recognised by UK readers. Its prominence would seem to indicate a desire to reach an English public unfamiliar with Polish poetry. As the book aimed to alert the West to the situation in Poland, this appears a likely explanation of this decision.

The Burning Forest also features an endorsement by a key English literary figure. Immediately after the exhaustive index at the front of the book, the reader finds a second epigraph: a reprint of the introduction to the first anthology of

Polish poetry ever to be published in English, written by its editor, John Bowring. The 1827 text apologises for delays in publication, and explains them by difficulties and dangers accompanying attempts to communicate with Poles, and by the editor's dissatisfaction with the quality of his "imperfect specimens." Bowring concludes by stating that "All that I can now hope for is to prepare the way for some future and more intelligent student." (The Burning Forest 11) No context or explanation is given for the inclusion of this text. Readers unfamiliar with Specimens of the Polish Poets or with John Bowring himself will likely not be aware of the significance of this short text in the history of Polish-English translation. There are implications, however, that will not escape any informed reader. First, the lot of Poland does not appear to have changed in a century and a half, as it is still suffering under a foreign oppressor, and the introduction to a book dating back to the Georgian era remains as pertinent as ever. Second, and perhaps more importantly in the context of patronage, Czerniawski places his work within a long-established continuum, a tradition which started in England as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century. And finally, though he does not state it explicitly, it appears evident that by quoting Bowring, Czerniawski casts himself as the "future and more intelligent student", and his book as the work for which Bowring's pioneering collection paved the way. Thus, Czerniawski indirectly claims the blessing of an important historical figure and adds considerable weight and authority to his selection.

While I have noted that Postwar Polish Poetry makes full use of Miłosz's persona as a Nobel Prize winning poet, the focus in the back cover notes remains



on his Western credentials rather than on his artistic sensitivities. Thus, the facts listed there inform readers that at the time of publication, Miłosz had lived in the United States for 23 years already; that he is a Professor at the University of California; and that he belongs to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. To reassure readers that the collection's editor has been recognized as worthy by their own systems of evaluation could be construed as a manoeuvre that validates the work as "good" from a point of view outside of Poland.

While Postwar Polish Poetry is the most salient and unambiguous example of institutional patronage amongst the anthologies from the Eighties, it is by no means the only one; however, the remaining instances tend to be of a more incidental nature, stemming from the translators' attempts to secure funding or the publishers' renown on their home market. The UNESCO endorsement advertised on the back cover of Ariadne's Thread, for example, also increases the book's authority and canonising potential, as does having been published by the prestigious Bloodaxe in the case of The Burning Forest.

It should be noted that none of these tactics involve advertising the book by convincing potential readers of the quality of the poetry it contains. Indeed, the decade's only book highlighting poetics in the publicly available peritext is Ariadne's Thread. Above the translators' names, a descriptive note lists "powerful imagery and richly evocative language" as "the great strengths of Polish poetry" – interestingly, based on the research outlined in Chapter 3, Anglophone readers would be unlikely to associate those particular features with writing from Poland.

Their selection for inclusion on the cover is an important statement, a departure from the established standards. In fact, those aspects of Polish poetry are presented as the very factors which “have often prevented translation”, implying that the Ariadne’s Thread breaks new ground by publishing texts with an artistic dimension which had thus far stymied translators, texts of a kind heretofore unavailable to English speakers.

## **1.4 Central Issue: Polish Public Narrative**

### **1.4.1 Engaging with the Narrative**

From the very first sentence of his Introduction to Witness Out of Silence, Stephen Spender positions himself and other Western poets in direct opposition to those hailing from Poland (which is introduced as representative of a wider concept of the East). The relationship between the two contrasting groups is characterised by shame and guilt on the author’s side: as opposed to Poles, the poets from Spender’s world are not regularly interrogated, tortured, or otherwise repressed, nor do they have a clear history of such abuse; “by contrast with this tremendous burden of suffering, oppression, torment, and injustice,” Spender asserts, “many of our preoccupations as poets in the West are trivial. The poets writing in this volume may not be free: but the very lack of freedom becomes their tremendous subject matter.” (Spender 9). Poland’s position on the periphery also seems to work to its advantage:

No revolutionary artistic movement, no new dynamic in creative expression, ever came from the established culture, but always

from the outer limits. So it has been with Polish writing: ignored by the great powers of Europe, Poland has produced a long line of brilliant exciting and different writers, and the sufferings that the Polish people have undergone have fuelled the creative imagination of the writers. (Vangelisti x)

These quotations illustrate the paradox already documented in Chapter 3: Western writers lament the plight of Poland whilst viewing the country's oppressed state as a unique source of creativity.

This attitude may not surprise in the early 80s, in the context of the Martial Law. Towards the end of the decade, however, little seems to have changed at the end of the decade, as introductory texts in both of the volumes published in 1988 appear to echo very similar sentiments. The editors of Ariadne's Thread recognise Poland is metaphorically female and weak, which puts her on the margins; however, it is this marginal position gives its artists the freedom to experiment and innovate (xi). Czerniawski notes that "The Poles are touchingly old-fashioned and sentimental: in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century they still believe in the value and effectiveness of poetry" (13). The sentimental, romanticised view of Polish poetry endured, even though, as shown in Chapter 2, the period saw a growing consciousness of the imminent fall of communism, and saw attempts from poets in the second and third circulation to redefine their work outside of the oppressor-dissident paradigm.

Nowhere do the anthologists acknowledge this tendency, continuing instead to cast Polish poets as warriors. Spender paints a clear, romantic picture of

artists fighting torturers with the power of their imagination and their words. In fact, his brief description of the role of the poet in Polish society verges on the hyperbole, even on the caricature.

On the one hand, the state with its dehumanized propaganda, police espionage, interrogation, murders, tortures; on the other hand, against all this, the poets, with their affirmations of heroism and resistance ... The weapons they use – apart from their courage in action - are, in their poetry, the expression of suffering, the insistence on human values. They are sharpened with wit, satire, bitter humour.” (Spender 10)

Spender goes on to list several functions of the poetry, stating that poets can both “imagine for us forces of humanity powerful enough to sustain themselves against the almost incredible inhumanity of the faces, the language, the means employed by the state,” and that the poems can “make one see” the true horror of totalitarian society, a role usually left to journalists. (Spender 10) Miłosz takes the reasoning a step further, and argues that this accumulated, shared experience of oppression qualifies Polish poets as eminently suitable to assume their responsibilities as their nation’s bards – more so than their Anglophone colleagues. In particular, he professes that it imbues their irony with a greater depth, changing it from mere “elegant scepticism” to an expression of “the will to defend the basic values of man’s existence” (xi).

All this praise, however, is addressed to the poets as people, with very little attention paid to their work. There are consequences to being cast as an activist.

Despite Graham's admission of having chosen poems on a specific topic, Spender seems to treat the collection as representative. His impression is thus that while Polish poetry is noble and serves an important purpose, it is limited to a very narrow field of subject, which he sees this as a form of oppression: resisting the totalitarian government means engaging in a game played with rules it set out, and thus by necessity creates poetry that is perhaps less relevant in a world where those rules do not exist or cannot be enforced.

In Humps & Wings, Nyczek expands on this insight from the insider's point of view, noting that in practice, the choice to eschew official publishing channel brought its own limitations. Underground poets who "first of all sacrificed their public lives" forfeited more than official recognition as writers. "They sacrificed something more," writes Nyczek: "a part of their unexhibited poetic sensibility." He explains:

Of course, they could (nobody stopped them, quite to the contrary) have written poems about the mystery of love, the distress of parting, or about the various problems concerned with seeking God and fleeing the devil. Few such will be found among those of this generation. (10)

Nyczek differs from Spender in that he does not treat poetic activism as defining characteristic of Polish poetry, but rather sees it as the consequence of a conscious decision made by the poets, stemming from their shared historical experience. He complicates the narrative of Poland, the land of guerrilla poets, by

pointing out that they knew they were narrowing the scope of their work even as they committed to resisting the powers that be.

#### **1.4.2 Taming the Public Narrative**

In fact, Nyczek begins his introduction to Humps & Wings by describing the student riots of 1968. While noting their worldwide co-incidence, he argues that whereas students rebelling against the status quo in the United States and in Western Europe hoped to abolish existing socio-political structures and introduce “new canons of morality ... along with new ways of thinking”, their Polish counterparts “did not demand a change in Poland’s political system,” which “must have seemed unimaginable.” (Humps & Wings 7) Instead, they took to the streets in the hope of uncovering the truth - a word which Nyczek capitalises when he first uses it, to stress and highlight the importance of the concept for Poles living under Gomułka’s rule. He stresses the fact that the riots were sparked by a ban on performances of a verse-drama by Poland’s romantic poet-hero, Mickiewicz (the enthusiastically received play is anti-tsarist, and thus could easily be imbued with a more contemporary, anti-soviet message). “Mickiewicz,” Nyczek explains, “became the hero of the ‘March generation’; mass meetings were held around his statue in Warsaw and in Cracow, and his name became the slogan for freedom of the word.” (Humps & Wings 7)

Nyczek thus emphasises that the unrest was due primarily to the prevalence of an official discourse permeated with lies and half-truths, a corruption and usurpation of language. The principal rallying cry of the

demonstrators, he reports, was “The press lies,” not “out with communism,” and the real battle was not fought exclusively in clashes with riot police on the pavements of Polish cities: some of the hardest blows were dealt by anti-semitic government spin doctors depicting the students as Zionist agents hoping to bring down the powers that be. (8, 9)

Identifying the contested area as language, rather than political influence, makes the poets’ role in the struggle between oppressed and oppressor easier to grasp for non-local observers. Indeed, the poet as a preserver of language can be internalised with greater ease than the dissident fighter directly confronting police violence and state oppression that the readers know from the Anglophone press. Nyczek states clearly that it is in defence of the truth that the poets of the ’68 generation entered the underground seeing this clandestine network as a third road, a viable solution to the falsely binary choice offered by state censors: limit the scope of their writing to non-controversial subjects or keep silent. (9, 10)

Six years after the publication of Nyczek’s introduction, Czerniawski described his own outlook on the issue. He looks back to 1939 and the German invasion as a traumatic experience, the final blow that shattered “the idealism that had dominated Polish thinking for the previous hundred years.” (17) Miłosz and Różewicz, he feels, are two poets who, like Mickiewicz before them, ultimately lost their belief in the real power of literature when face with the ordeals of foreign occupation. Czerniawski quotes the famous lines by Miłosz, often read as a call to arms. He interprets them as a confession of powerlessness, a sign of disillusionment.

What is poetry which does not save

Nations or people?

A connivance with official lies (18)

Czerniawski replies with Krynicki's poem – taking care to unequivocally identify the author's political status as “resolute dissident” to strengthen a point he makes about the nature and function of poetry.

What is poetry, which obviously

Saves neither nations nor people,

Nor nations from people,

Nor people from nations,

Nor nations and people

From themselves?

What is poetry, which saves

That which nations and people

So easily destroy? (18)

Czerniawski interprets what he sees as Miłosz's and Różewicz's disenchantment as bordering on cynicism, observing that “neither ... has taken their own conclusions seriously: they have continued to write copiously and have attempted to justify this self-contradiction by treating poetry as, according to Miłosz, ‘a kind of higher politics, and unpolitical politics’” (18-19). He contrasts this with Zbigniew Herbert's “artistic sensitivity which enables him to judge how far he can go without compromising himself as a poet” (19).



Czerniawski returns to Norwid yet again to quote from the poet's preface to his 1865 book, Vademecum, wherein he asserts the following:

Poetry as a force survives all manner of temporal conditions, but it does not equally survive them as an art. Indeed, it gains power to the extent that it takes over the activities of others close to it, who neglect their job. But in this gaining of power, it loses its art. This then is the present state of Polish poetry... (19)

Czerniawski states explicitly that in his opinion, Norwid's assessment of the Polish situation is still valid, as the "pressures upon Polish poetry have not changed, either in their severity or their nature," and expresses his doubts on the possibility of the circumstances changing before long.

Czerniawski follows the above remarks with Norwid's biography, wherein the poet is compared to GM Hopkins and Emily Dickinson. After introducing Norwid as a "father figure" of Polish modernism, a "patron saint" (13) of poetry, Czerniawski compares him as an equal to established, universally respected figures of English and American poetry – thus equating Polish literary tradition with the two Anglophone ones, and putting them on equal footing, all the while emphasising the historically conditioned higher status of poetry in his homeland.

And yet, despite those seemingly insurmountable differences, editors have made attempts to find cultural common ground between Poland and the west, to show how Polish poetry may function in a changed context. Humps & Wings provides a prime example: I have mentioned earlier Vangelisti's statement that McBride and he "had to drop some few poems which, for formal or contextual

reasons, might confuse readers unfamiliar with Polish literature and history.”

(Humps & Wings 5) This rather off-hand caveat can be read as an indirect reassurance for readers, affirming that those poems which have been included in the published volume can be appreciated without an extensive knowledge of Polish culture. Since neither of the two editors had felt the need to include poems from outside of the original selection, and with a Pole credited as editor, the book can be further understood as an insider’s depiction of the Polish poetry scene between 1968 and 1981. However, in the postscript, McBride goes even further than Vangelisti: rather than simply reassure his readers about the accessibility of this foreign poetry, he makes an effort to connect Polish realities with their experiences. After briefly mentioning the political and economical situation in Poland, he praises the poems for their emphasis on everyday topics, and their ability to show what he perceives as the true picture of “the Polish situation: less the rumors of invasion than matters of daily bread and silence.” He goes on to express his hope that “perhaps these poems written amid one propaganda serve, in translation, to reveal something else here” (Humps & Wings 77).

An indication as to the nature of “something else” can be found elsewhere in McBride’s postscript. His text doubles as an introduction to the book-series entitled “Invisible Cities,” which he had started co-editing with Vangelisti at the time of the publication of Humps & Wings. Its entire first half focuses primarily on explaining the eclectic nature of the intended series, and strives to justify the juxtaposition of the first two volumes: the anthology in question and a collection of avant-garde Italian verse. McBride posits that these two “poetries [are] by no

means equivalent, but still moments in this series inasmuch as both confront the language of mass media” (Humps & Wings 77). While this observation may read like a slightly forced attempt to connect two very different literatures, written in wildly differing contexts, it does make the poetry seem more relevant to non-Eastern bloc readers: McBride’s reasoning is that while Americans may find it hard to relate to a poetry of resistance to communism, the experience of all-pervasive media and the need to address their increasingly encroaching presence in their lives was a familiar issue. This first half of McBride’s postscript achieves more than just the advertisement of a new series of poetry books: whether intentionally or not, its author makes the Polish poetry collected in the volume appear relevant to American readers, by presenting it as engaging creatively with a subject of considerable importance in their daily lives.

### **1.5 Conclusion**

In conclusion, while the books published in the 80s began as relatively close reflections of the situation, the image and the real state of affairs grew further apart as time progressed. There was little noticeable change in the way in which Polish poetry was represented throughout the decade, even as the political situation and the position of poets and poetry in Poland evolved. However, while the simple myth of the dissident poet so prevalent in the media in the same period was amply exploited to promote the books, a closer analysis shows that at least a few of the editors have felt the need to complicate the narrative, by showing that even Polish poets have paid a price for writing activist verse.

## 2. AFTER THE FALL

### 2.1 Making the Books

#### 2.1.1 Intentions

The fall of communism, unsurprisingly, brought about significant changes in the functions anthologists professed they hoped their books would perform. Their stated goals fall into two general groupings. The first includes three books with clearly defined artistic agendas; while each reflects very different standards, the general approach they illustrate, i.e. the selection of particular poetics as the driving force, constitutes a new development among collections of Polish poetry; Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule (published in the USA soon after the fall of communism, in 1991) , Dreams of Fires: 100 Polish Poems 1970-1989 (printed by the Austrian publisher Poetry Salzburg in 2004), and Six Polish Poets (the most recent anthology of the entire corpus, dating from 2010 and part of a series by Arc Publications) all belong in this category. The second grouping, in which all four remaining volumes are included<sup>35</sup>, is characterised by the urge to educate readers rather than promote a specific aesthetic, be it by showcasing innovations in Polish poetry or by drawing the readers' attention to its heretofore neglected or misrepresented facets.

On the surface, Spoiling Cannibals' Fun seems to follow the narrative of oppressed Poland to the letter. The subtitle is telling: it contains the most overt titular definition of Polish poetry in unambiguously political terms of the entire studied corpus of anthologies, and features the only appearance of the word

“communist” in such a prominent position. The addition of the term “last” makes for an almost gleeful tone, and signals a book likely to provide closure, to synthesise an entire period. Finally, the main title’s mention of “spoiling fun” for “cannibals”, which evokes opposition and struggle, completes the picture and raises expectations of a book exemplifying what, for many, was still the standard approach to Polish poetry: to put it succinctly, Spoiling Cannibals’ Fun seems like the last hurrah of the great Polish narrative.

However, at the very beginning of his introduction, Barańczak takes great pains to clarify that “it cannot be emphasized enough that this anthology is not restricted to directly political themes, much less to partisan approaches of any kind. On the contrary, it is precisely the anthology’s thematic variety and the pluralistic coexistence of different outlooks that may engage, we hope, the reader’s interest” (1, 2). His reluctance to accept “political poetry” as the master category for Polish verse, already exemplified in Barańczak’s Polish writings discussed in Chapter 2, informs this work as well. And indeed, as he develops the idea above there are more echoes of his introduction to Poeta pamięta: soon after the assertion reported above another caveat: “it is impossible,” Barańczak writes, “to detach even what appear to be the most universal and apolitical among these poems ... from the background of recent history” (1, 2). In other words, the context itself endows all the poems created in the period of communist rule with a special status: inextricably linked to historical events, the texts become examples of the “poetry of witness” that is Barańczak’s chosen aesthetic. The goal of Spoiling Cannibals’ Fun appears to be a final assessment of Polish poetry from the 70s and

80s, couched in terms less limiting, and less fraught with connotations, than simple adjectives like “political” or “dissident.”

Another collection motivated by aesthetic considerations, Dreams of Fires brings the work of an under-represented group of Polish poets to Anglophone readers. This may not be immediately apparent: the book’s marketing peritext, which I will discuss in greater detail in section 2.2 of this Chapter, seems to announce an anthology of dissident verse, carried by the strength of the pre-1989 public narrative of Polish dissident poetry: although the book was published in 2004, it focuses on the same period as Spoiling Cannibals’ Fun.

It comes as a surprise, therefore, David Malcolm and Georgia Scott make clear in their introduction, “this anthology brings together some work by a group of poets, mostly born in the early 1950s, several of whom are often associated with each other by commentators as representatives of the tendency called “Nowa prywatność” (New Privacy) in Polish poetry in the 1970s and 1980s.” (11) This reveals the intentions of the editors: to represent a specific aesthetic, a poetic “tendency” present on the Polish literary scene in the period leading up to the fall of the totalitarian government. No mention is made of the standing this grouping enjoyed in literary circles, be they officially sanctioned or underground. In fact, as I have established in Chapter 2, the movement was marginalised by underground critics under Martial Law due to its reluctance to address matters of public concern. As a consequence, there was an almost total lack of representation of the movement in Anglophone publications.

Meanwhile, after this brief introductory note, the authors start employing the much more general term of “generation” when referring to the group. They write of “a striking homogeneity among the poets of this generation” (12), list distinguishing features “of this generation’s poetry” (13) and talk of “the created world of this generation’s poetry” (13). This leaves the reader with the impression that the “New Privacy” movement defined the aesthetics of almost two decades, which, as I have established above, could not be further from the truth. It is symptomatic that although they cover the same period, only three poets have been selected as contributors for both Dreams of Fires and Spoiling Cannibals’ Fun – and only one of their poems appears in both volumes<sup>36</sup>. The drive to bring to greater prominence what the editors perceive as an unjustly neglected poetic movement is very clear.

Finally, the impulse behind Six Polish Poets was the desire to introduce the newest Polish poetry to the Anglophone market. The book “makes available to the English-language reader the poetry of the younger generation of poets whose first collections (with one exception) have been published in the past decade” (Büchler 9). Published twenty years after the change of regime, the book eschews the Brulion generation and collects the work of its successors, who “re-examine and experiment with traditional poetic forms, themes and cultural references” (Büchler 9). Both quotations come from Alexandra Büchler, author of the “series editor’s preface”; this is important, because Büchler herself did not play an active part in the selection of poems. She is thus ready to admit that while the volume “provides an insight into today’s scene in Poland,” it is far from an objective and inclusive

work, and “cannot claim to be representative of Polish poetry as a whole” (Büchler 9).

The editor, meanwhile, makes it very clear that his intention is to use the publication as an opportunity to further his own artistic agenda. As a poet himself, Jacek Dehnel chose to include his own work in the anthology, which in a book featuring only six authors can be read as indicative of a strong personal attachment to the aesthetics showcased in the collection, identified as “neo-classicist”<sup>37</sup>. And indeed, in his introduction, Dehnel makes it clear that he perceives this aesthetic trend as the next stage of evolution for Polish verse. He contends that a poetry which “combines traditional forms ... with contemporary language and settings” is precisely the kind that “bridges some recent divisions, reconciling poetry from before 1989 with the work of the Brulion generation” (13). He thus qualifies Büchler’s statement that Six Polish Poets is not representative of the Polish scene: Dehnel’s very bold statement implies after the chaos of the transition period, his preferred genre of poetry is the optimal choice. The intentions behind the book are thus slightly divergent, with the series editor mostly concerned with innovation and the anthologist striving to establish his chosen poetics as the logical next step in the evolution of Polish verse.

The second grouping of anthologies I identified comprises books primarily concerned with educating their readers. They exhibit more common features than the three anthologies discussed above, and thus do not require separate analyses at this point. Tellingly, they all feature an extensive educational peritext, with poet biographies, introductory essays, meaningful categorisations, explanatory notes,



and Polish originals printed next to the English translations<sup>38</sup> – all standard indications, as noted in Section 2.2 of Chapter 1, of texts with didactic ambitions. In Young Poets of a New Poland, Donald Pirie focuses on the watershed moment of 1989 and the innovations it brought about in Polish poetry. Regina Grol's Amber's Aglow: an Anthology of Contemporary Polish Women's Poetry is motivated by a strong intent to “crumble the walls of ignorance about Polish women's poetry, make the poetry known outside of Poland, and provide a doorway to the understanding of Poland and its culture” (Grol xxi). And although the strategies they select to realise their goals are different, both Altered State: The New Polish Poetry and Carnivorous Boy Carnivorous Bird: Poetry From Poland strive to provide alternatives to the obsolete identity-forming narrative of witness and resistance<sup>39</sup>. All of the books listed above vary in the precise nature of the lessons they intend to teach, but they do all share a similar didactic animus.

### 2.1.2 Selecting the Texts: Goals and Criteria

When it comes to selection criteria, the period after the fall of communism differs from the 80s in one aspect: gone is the reliance on topicality and accessibility that typified editors of primarily politically motivated works, to be replaced, in four of the period's seven collections, by a strong emphasis on innovation and youth.

Pirie's Young Poets of a New Poland is a case in point: already in the title, the implied selection criteria are made very clear. The title's promise of innovation is validated in other peritextual elements: in the “Acknowledgments”, Pirie

discloses that the anthology began as four translations of Bronisław Maj's poems, but grew due to the support of the poet himself, Grzegorz Musiał, and Robert Tekieli. Interestingly, while Tekieli was one of the editors of Brulion, Musiał counted among the magazine's most fervent opponents<sup>40</sup>, which may elicit expectations of both sides of the Barbarians /Classicists debate being represented in the anthology among readers following developments on the Polish scene. More casual readers, however, will simply discover two entirely new Polish authors, neither of whom had been anthologised or indeed published in English before<sup>41</sup>.

But Pirie's quest for innovation goes further than simply acknowledging new influences: Pirie states that he has not always acted in accordance with the suggestions of Maj, Musiał and Tekieli, and expresses the hope that "the contents will surprise and satisfy at the same time" (vi). He makes no attempt to identify new dominant trends in Polish poetry. Instead, after briefly introducing each of his chosen poets and debating their individual voice, he notes that "the poems collected [in the anthology] speak with the authentic voices of real 'singularities' and their very sensual experience of what is more than a New Poland – it is a New World" (xxvi). This establishes freshness and originality as more than just buzzwords meant to help sell more books: they become the required element, the common feature connecting all the poems to be found on the pages of his anthology.

Altered State is another title which gives away the editors' selection criteria: the main part suggests change, and the subtitle, "The New Polish Poetry", constitutes one more example of opting for "newness" as the dominant note when

attempting to define Polish poetry in the post-communist era. Unsurprisingly, the first sentence of Rod Mengham's introduction does not leave much doubt as to what the editors were looking for when selecting poems for their book:

This anthology breaks new ground in the English-speaking world by publishing translations of poems by Polish writers all under the age of forty five. It reflects the range of different writing practices that have flourished in various parts of Poland over the last fifteen years and tries to achieve a balance between them. Practically all the work in this selection was written in the post-communist period (11).

In this fragment, Mengham provides a description reminiscent of Pirie's: not only are the poems included in the book new, they are also expressions of a sudden increase in the range of different writing practices which took place amongst Polish poets after the advent of democracy. However, while Pirie saw the source of what he perceived as a new multiplicity of voices in the emergence of an entirely "new world", Mengham notes that the poetry presented in Altered State "reflects the evolution of a sensibility that began to emerge in the mid 1980s" ("Introduction" 11), which is more in line with the prevalent trend in Polish literary criticism as outlined in Chapter 2 of this dissertation<sup>42</sup>. Echoing Polish classifications, he mentions the Barbarians, the New Classicists, and later movements such as Banalism, and notes that "cultural change in Poland over the last two decades has been so rapid and constant that a turnover of poetic styles has

not only been inevitable but also almost incapable of keeping pace with the rate of transformation” (12).

The multiplicity of voices alluded to by both Pirie and Mengham is what Marcin Baran focuses on in his introduction to Carnivorous Boy. He does not explicitly tout the novelty of the book’s poetry; instead, it is implied in his interpretation of the impact of the political upheavals on literature. He writes that historically, in Poland, “poetry has been burdened by readers and poets alike with duties typically delegated to politicians, soldiers, priests or journalists. The political, social and cultural changes of the last decade allowed young Polish poetry to cast off this burden” (i). Consequently, Baran announces, the anthologised poems are “singular, self-contained and exceptional”, insofar as singularity is possible in the days of “various intellectual movements identified by the prefix *post-*”(i). Based on this statement, it would appear that the quality of the individual poets’ work and their uniqueness thus constitute the only qualities that Baran into account when choosing texts for inclusion in the anthology:

Out of fifty poets who could have found their way into this anthology I have selected twenty-four. What do they have in common? They were born in Poland between 1958 and 1969; moreover, all of them have moved within aesthetically and politically independent circles. What distinguishes these poets are their individual imaginations and sensitivities of their poetic substance. (i)

I have already discussed the weight attached to innovation in the case of Six Polish Poets on the side of the series editor, and mentioned Dehnel's insistence on furthering the new formalist poetry he thinks might become the dominant voice in the world of Polish verse. This particular rationale puts his book squarely on the intersection between the previously discussed grouping of books prioritising the idea of the new and the other grouping, comprised of anthologies whose editors resorted to the tried and tested strategy of relying on their personal aesthetic taste, with Barańczak's idea of an ironic poetry of witness (as opposed to a romanticised political poetry) another choice example.

Dreams of Fires adds complexity to the same strategy simply because the book's external paratext suggests selection criteria different to the ones actually employed by the editors, which are to be found in the "Acknowledgments," which seem to introduce a very different book than the title or the back cover copy<sup>43</sup>. First, in direct opposition to the book's marketing peritext, there is no intimation that Poland is still torn asunder by political struggle. In fact, the first two lines explain that "many of the poems were translated in another time in another world. Before 1989" (Joachimiak, Malcolm, Scott 9). Having thus established that the anthology is a retrospective, the editors go on to explain that they had no ambition to be comprehensive. Not only did they limit their selection of authors to adherents of the "New Privacy" movement; they were "selective" even there, omitting certain authors (most notably Bronisław Maj, who, as they state, has already been extensively translated into English) and certain texts (as "no anthology could contain the mass of interesting verse of these decades"). They do,

however, imply that their chosen bias “reflects the dynamics of Polish literature and history”, and they admit to “unabashed local patriotism” (Malcolm & Scott , “Acknowledgments” 9).

Such idiosyncratic criteria make for an unusual collection. Dreams of Fires only shares one poet with Spoiling Cannibals’ Fun, a book which deals with the same period and none at all with either Altered State or Carnivorous Boy, both published almost within a year of the anthology in question. While Pirie does feature several of the same poets, his assessment of their work differs dramatically from that of Joachimiak, Malcolm, and Scott. He writes:

The poets who emerged around the University of Gdańsk became known as the New Privacy, excited as they were by the post-Freudian investigation of individual imagination and personal worlds. Their work was extraordinarily diverse in form and content. ... [Their work] seemed selfish and irrelevant in the context of events of 1980-81, and they were branded as such by both the official and the underground press. (Pirie xiv, xv)

This difference of opinion supports their claim that the “New Privacy” poets were under-appreciated and under-represented. Twenty years after the movement’s inception, Joachimiak, Malcolm, and Scott fill a gap on the English speaking market with Dreams of Fires, albeit their choice of a deceptive promotional strategy may well undermine their goal to win the Gdańsk poets some approval.

### 2.1.3 Translation-Related Paratext

There remains one book whose selection criteria I have not discussed: Regina Grol's Ambers Aglow: an Anthology of Contemporary Polish Women's Poetry. Aside from opting to represent a single gender, Grol is the only anthologist from this period to refer to a criterion which was crucial in the 80s: translatability.

Little known in the West and written in a language with minority status, Polish poetry is very difficult to translate. It emanates from a 'high context' culture, in which words have complex connotations, and resonate with other words, historical references and political content. Poems written in Polish, per force (sic), convey much more to native speakers of the language than the English translations can ever convey to American readers ... Moreover, the tonal effects of Polish poetry, its musical quality, are often inescapably lost in translation. (xxxiv)

Thus, Grol expresses her belief that Polish culture is somehow richer in context than others, and that the Polish language's melodies are more difficult to render. While this is questionable – there is ample evidence in the field of translation studies to indicate that literature from every culture and in every language will refer to elements that will inevitably be eroded in the shift to another context and another tongue – one can interpret Grol's statement in the sense that readers are more likely to be aware of the cultural frames of reference, i.e. narratives and factual paratexts, of more dominant countries than those consigned

to the periphery, which would indeed render some aspects of Polish poems less intelligible.

These unavoidable obstacles dictated the choice of poems for this volume, as well as the decision to make the anthology bilingual.

Some excellent poems have not been included in the anthology because their linguistic density, tonal complexity or rather involved architectonic structure rendered them insufficiently 'legible' in English. Dominant in this volume are poems which foreground the semantic content, are likely to be accessible to American readers, and in which greater emphasis is placed on the lexical rather than the phonetic aspect. (xxxv)

The interpretive consequences of such an approach remain unchanged from those listed in section 1.2 of this Chapter: a focus on the poems' content to the detriment of voice and style, a strengthening of the anthologist's position, and a reassurance for readers whose own conceptual frameworks are comfortably identified as amply sufficient for an informed reading of the foreign texts. The fact that Grol's introduction is the only one to mention translatability as a criterion is illustrative of a more general movement to devote less attention to the issue of translation in the peritext. While in the 80s, the status of the texts as translated artefacts was explicitly addressed in the peritext, to justify editorial decisions, to shed light on the text's perceived position, to facilitate their proposed function, and to transmit the translator's or editor's ideas. Meanwhile, in the post-1989



period, the topic is only raised in a few of the anthologies, and rarely addressed in substantial detail.

In Spoiling Cannibals' Fun, Helen Vendler makes some remarks on the subject of translation. She treats the disappearance of several aspects (such as prosody and intertextuality) of the poems as an evident necessity, in essence, because the target audiences lack the necessary paratextual knowledge:

The individual poets in this collection have been translated, by several hands, into an English always readable, often inspired. ... Much, of course, is missing; the intertextual lyric references that must animate these poems in their original language; the rhymes and rhythms that make lyric musical, the shades of diction serving to summon up religious or political discourses ineluctably fixed in the minds of the original audience for these poems. (Vendler xix, xx)

Unlike Grol, however, she does not see this unavoidable reduction as an argument against the transfer of stylistically complex work, choosing to believe that enough endures to validate the poems' existence in English: "even in translation one hears echoes of the language-field of contemporary Poland – the wooden language of the Communist state, street slang, prayer, coded dissident discourse, literary allusion" (Vendler xix, xx). It is interesting that this last remarks classifies Communist discourse as part of "contemporary Poland."

Spoiling Cannibals' Fun appeared in print in 1991, two years after Lech Wałęsa became president, at a time when the new Polish democracy was doing what it

could to put its communist past behind it. Whether this is an insightful remark on the difficulty of returning a language to normal speech after decades of newspeak, or a testament to the strength of the narrative of oppression, it shows on Vendler's own example that American readers are not as deprived of paratextual aids for the assimilation of Polish foreignness as she assumes – and the most common narrative that still provides them with contexts for understanding is well suited for this particular collection<sup>44</sup>.

The only other anthology to address translation directly is the latest addition to the corpus: Six Polish Poets. The first section of Büchler's preface allows insight into her views on translation, and by extension, into her idea of the book's function. Speaking as the editor of a series of translation anthologies, she casts translation as a source of innovation: "poetry," she writes, "can be and *is* found in translation; in fact, any good translation *reinvents* the poetry of the original" (9). She goes on to argue against what she perceives as a deep and deplorable mistrust of Anglophone cultures towards translation of modern poetry.

This dialogue ... is so important to writers in countries and regions where translation has always been an integral part of the literary environment ... Writing without reading poetry from many different traditions would be unthinkable for the poets in the anthologies of this new series. (9)

Such a stance implies two important convictions: first, that poetry translation does not need defending, since a low rate of inward literary translation can be considered as an indicator of a shallower pool of inspiration and a generally

poorer culture; and second, that Büchler regards the poetry in the book as fully fledged literature (as opposed to textual artefacts defined by their function, for example), and her arguments focus on the possibility and the value of moving into English. In Chapter 3, Section 4, I have shown earlier instances of Polish poetry held up as an example to English speakers. However, their exemplary status was usually justified by the extraordinary socio-historical in which they were created: the value was in the fight for freedom of expression and the suffering of the poets. Büchler, meanwhile, simply contends that literatures profit from cross-fertilisation, and that artistically sound work can prove stimulating whatever its original language.

## 2.2 Selling the Books

Marketing techniques visible in the paratext of this period's anthologies differ considerably from those employed in the 80s. While some anthologists still relied on the old referential framework from the communist era, most turn to the allure of novelty and the patronage of established individuals and institutions.

As one would expect from the book's title, the copy on the back cover of Spoiling Cannibals' Fun tackles the dominant narrative of Polish poetry. The first two sentences describe the turmoil, suffering and distress that Poles have had to endure, and their paradoxically inspirational effect: "The past twenty years have witnessed some of the most traumatic and inspiring moments in Polish history. This turbulent period has also been a time of unprecedented achievement in all forms of Polish poetry – lyric, religious, political, meditative" (back cover). The

text then references two of the poets American readers are likely to have heard about, Miłosz and Zagajewski, and promises to shed new light on their work by placing them in a wider context. This achieves the dual purpose of assuring the part of the potential audience that already has at least a passing interest in Polish poetry that their probable favourites can be found in the collection and of expanding their understanding of those poets' oeuvre.

If the first paragraph strives to arouse the interest of readers at least somewhat familiar with Poland's recent political and literary history, the quotation from Vendler's introductory essay that follows it appears to have been selected to broaden the appeal of the book. The scholar reassures readers that the anthology constitutes a collection of "real poems", exhibiting "qualities of imagination, concision, and architectonic firmness that one finds in convincing lyrics." She goes on to assure readers that insights derived from Polish poets apply both to "life lived under totalitarian censorship and punishment" and to "life lived under the usual distractions and self-deceptions of the modern world" (back cover). Thus, the selected fragments state, with all the authority of a Harvard professor's words, that the poetry has real literary value beyond that of a simple socio-political document of a now bygone era. This reflects the trend, described in Chapter 3, of assimilating Polish poetry by equating the presence of an oppressive communist government with other types of difficulties, more familiar to those living in western societies.

Spoiling Cannibals' Fun thus becomes the first instance of a tendency that will reappear throughout the studied period: making use of the grand narrative of

oppression to appeal to readers in a situation where the oppressor is no longer a threat. However, this particular book's position is unique in that one of the creators was one of the most important figures both on the Polish underground literary scene and on the field of poetry translation. His status within the referential framework, combined with the retrospective outlook adopted by the anthology, classifies the book as a participant in the narrative, with an important role to play, i.e. to provide the story with an ending. The publishers of subsequent collections would have to decide whether to try and formulate a new narrative to once again make Polish poetry attractive and accessible, or to exploit an old framework whose conclusion would have been written by Barańczak.

As I have indicated on more than one occasion in this chapter, Dreams of Fires is a case in point. The dust jacket copy describes the Poland of the 70s and 80s in unequivocally sensationalist terms:

Poland in the 1970s and 1980s was a country in the throes of political upheaval. Political murders, tanks on the streets, the threat of invasion from the Soviet Union, the challenges to the Communist state thrown down by the Solidarity movement, brutal police violence, strikes, economic chaos, a bankrupt Marxist ideology, a militant Catholic church – and for many Poles, the day to day struggle to survive with some measure of dignity and integrity. Out of this witches' brew emerged the first non-Communist government in Eastern Europe since the 1940s. And a

poetry that resists, that bites back, that cries in despair, that dreams  
of the fires to come. (back cover)

The fact that a book published in 2004 still chooses to focus on  
battleground imagery testifies to the strength of the grand narrative identifying  
Poland as a country wracked by a permanent internal struggle<sup>45</sup>. I have shown that  
by this time, Polish poets themselves, if they chose to acknowledge this  
historically obsolete label at all, were, for the most part, eager to shed it in favour  
of a less restrictive and romantic position<sup>46</sup>. Meanwhile, the second paragraph  
goes on to state that “this anthology contains the work of authors ... who, in the  
1970s and 1980s, created a space in which the *danse macabre* of Communist  
Poland could – in memorable language – be rehearsed, analysed, rent apart and  
annulled. [These poets] were some of the system’s gravediggers, and more, for  
they also speak of experiences that transcend the particular circumstances of late-  
Communist Poland” (back cover). This is casting Polish poets in a familiar role.  
And yet, critics would be surprised to see the authors from this specific collection  
listed among the ranks of freedom fighters; as shown in the section devoted to the  
intended functions of anthologies, the chosen authors were associated with New  
Privacy, and indeed, many of them were criticised for choosing to focus on the  
intimate, the personal, and the confessional, at a time when poetry was supposed  
to fulfil a far more public function – i.e. for opting for poetics exactly opposite to  
those described on the dust jacket<sup>47</sup>.

The back cover also features an excerpt from the “Preface”, written by  
renowned literary critic, translator and anthologist Daniel Weissbort. This brief

blurb appears at first glance to be the commonly encountered, nearly obligatory laudatory comment on the quality of the poetry inside the book; however, one fragment stands out as unusual. When Weissbort praises “the admirable, almost preternatural sensitivity of this poetry to what might thwart freedom or threaten human dignity, its exemplary calm and decent detachment,” he feels obligated to specify that these literary virtues have blossomed in “what was and still is a menacing reality” (back cover). In the year 2004, this is a puzzling statement, but coming from a figure of such authority – and supported by the lingering power of the old public narrative – it is unlikely to be questioned by casual readers. The image of Poland as the martyr of nations is perpetuated yet again, in the same year in which the country becomes part of the European Union.

Dreams of Fires is thus a textbook example of exploitation of an outdated narrative, a strategy made possible by the fact that no new narrative of sufficient strength has superseded it. It might seem a valid tactic, making use of the available factual paratext to stealthily introduce new translations into a culture. Going back in time again to the date of publication of Young Poets of a New Poland, however, reveals a method of presentation acknowledging the factual paratext readers were most likely to be familiar with for Polish poetry and yet overtly announcing the inevitable changes. In a way, this reflects the feelings of literary communities in Poland, who were expecting a breakthrough to accompany the socio-political sea-change (as described in Chapter 2).

Two brief paragraphs introduce Young Poets of a New Poland to the reader, both addressing issues also discussed in Pirie’s “Introduction.” The first of

the two brief sections mentions the fact that after fifty years of communist rule, the accompanying poetry, “sensitive to human oppression and political manipulation, reminding Western writers of the physical reality of the price of morality and truth” had to change with the falling regime, and evolved in “startlingly different directions” (back cover). Pirie goes on to claim that “the new, young Polish poetry ... refuses to be classified in easy political or psychological clichés ... the results of these investigations and revelations are as spectacular as they are unexpected” (back cover). This last sentence reads like a line from an advertisement, and for good reason: chronologically, Pirie’s is the first Anglophone collection of Polish verse to categorically reject the “dissident” label. It is also the first post-1989 anthology published in the United Kingdom. Its immediate predecessor and American equivalent, by Barańczak and Cavanagh, featured the word “communist” in its title and looked backwards at an era which had, by then, ended; Pirie, however, promises to look forward. The success of this endeavour is preconditioned on convincing readers that Polish poetry has retained its value, or rather, has given rise to new values beyond those it was traditionally associated, and Pirie, unwilling to make guesses at this early stage, opts for novelty, surprise, and spectacle: a strategy which will find many more adherents.

And indeed, I have already mentioned that depicting the new shape of Polish poetry was a primary goal for many of this period’s anthologists, and has also influenced their selection criteria; it shouldn’t come as a surprise that the aspect of novelty was also used to promote the books. Thus, the marketing blurb for Altered State (also copied word for word from Mengham’s “Introduction”),



begins with the announcement that “this anthology breaks new ground in the English-speaking world by publishing translations of poems by Polish writers all under the age of forty-five” (back cover), and an equally unwavering emphasis on the novelty aspect can be found in the first two paragraphs; Mengham makes a point of explaining that the poems collected in the book were written after the fall of the communist government. Interestingly, he mentions that Polish poetry began evolving, becoming “realigned contentiously with newly visible traditions of European and American writing” (back cover), several years before 1989. Likewise, the copy on the cover of Carnivorous Boy Carnivorous Bird states unequivocally that while Polish poets “have been burdened with duties typically delegated to politicians, soldiers, priests or journalists,” the recent upheavals on the political scene “have allowed Polish poets to cast off these burdens, and focus instead on individual expression” (back cover). The second paragraph posits that in the absence of those antiquated responsibilities, the obligations of contemporary Polish poets have shifted to serve “language and the human condition” (back cover). This constitutes a clear break with traditional representations of Polish poetry, and makes Carnivorous Boy Carnivorous Bird the first book published in the USA to overtly reject any connection to the cultural dynamics from the days of communism<sup>48</sup>.

The last of the anthologies heralding change and innovation is Six Polish Poets, with cover copy promising authors who represent a “younger generation, whose first collections (with one exception) have been published in the past decade” (back cover). These poets subscribe to a poetics twice-removed from

Polish poetry from communist times. If the initial reaction to the freedoms of democracy, i.e. the period covered by Altered State and Carnivorous Boy Carnivorous Bird, was “a highly individualistic, anarchic, sometimes brutal style”, then “the poets represented [in Six Polish Poets] re-examine and experiment with traditional poetic forms, themes and cultural references. Their dialogue with the reader is refined and witty, moving and informed, ranging across every aspect of human existence.” This sweeping statement constitutes a clear example of definition by opposition. If Altered State (and, to a lesser extent, Carnivorous Boy, Carnivorous Bird) represented the “Barbarian” side of Polish poetry, then Dehnel’s work positions itself firmly on the New Classicist side. The editors make no apologies for creating a book motivated by a purely artistic agenda, and unabashedly warn readers not to expect representativeness, arguing that despite its selective nature, their anthology “provides an insight into today’s literary scene in Poland” (back cover).

The popularity of novelty as a selling point should not be surprising. However, such a strategy can have dual consequences. On the one hand, it makes it easier for poets to maintain their individual voices, and encourages a multitude of readings rather than limiting readers to the ones supporting a dominant narrative. However, novelty is not identity, and the lack of factual or textual paratext to distinguish Polish poetry from other new foreign writing creates a very real risk.

There remains one more marketing strategy: relying on patronage. All anthologies engage in this practice to some extent. Spoiling Cannibals’ Fun

features a note on its front cover, which adds the information that the book has been “edited & translated by Stanisław Barańczak & Clare Cavanagh, with a foreword by Helen Vendler”, making full use of the reputation of both the renowned Polish poet, his American co-translator, and the professor of English from Harvard University. The information about Pirie which follows the introduction to New Poets of a New Poland focuses almost exclusively on his academic credentials, lending weight to the book as a serious study rather than, for example, a poet’s literary manifesto; a prominent note proclaims the book part of the European series of the UNESCO Collection of Representative Works, an endorsement from the London Arts Board is also advertised. These suggest funding and support from two highly prestigious institutions, increasing the importance of the book even in the eyes of a casual browser. Copy on Altered State’s dust jacket identifies its editors as “three distinguished literary figures”, and lists their various academic and artistic credentials. And the first paragraph on the back of Six Polish Poets emphasises the fact that the collection belongs to “New Voices from Europe and Beyond”, a series of translation anthologies meant to introduce “contemporary poets from Europe and beyond to a wider readership, a series which aims to keep a finger on the pulse of international contemporary poetry,” thus implying that the book finds itself on the cutting edge of European literature.

In this context, Ambers Aglow stands out from among the others, as reliance of patronage is effectively its only tactic for advertising the poetry it contains. Both laudatory comments featured on the back cover of the book, one

from author Eva Hoffman and one from Slavic Studies scholar Krystyna S. Olszer, refer directly to Wisława Szymborska's Nobel prize. Olszer writes:

This anthology provides a broad background for appreciating the poetry of Wisława Szymborska, the 1996 Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature. Szymborska's and her fellow poets' verses are anything but what is sometimes referred to as 'women's poetry.' These poems address the primary human issues of our time in the most appealing way. The translations, while being true to the originals, also manage to convey their artistic value. (back cover)

Olszer's note presents the book as little more than useful background reading for Szymborska aficionados. It is true that the Nobel prize catapulted Szymborska into common consciousness, and made her one of the most recognisable Polish names in the world; however, it does seem like a very reductive manoeuvre, one which could result in the plethora of other poets featured in the book having their work interpreted through the prism of Szymborska's verse, no matter how different their styles, aesthetics, and purpose. Hoffman strikes a slightly more graceful note as she tries to extend the glory of her Nobel prize onto the entire group of Polish women poets.

As the recent award of the Nobel Prize to Wisława Szymborska has shown, Polish women's poetry constitutes a powerful body of literature, which deserves to be better known in the West. This judiciously chosen and excellently translated anthology illustrates

the range of that poetry, its stylistic variety and interest. An important and richly rewarding collection. (back cover)

These two quotations are all the publisher chose to print on the book's outside. Curiously, Grol makes no reference to Szymborska's Nobel Prize in her introduction; this is an interesting example of a cover peritext clearly intended to make full use of the extended patronage of a prominent figure from the source culture, even though the editor/translator does not seem to hold her in such high esteem, and certainly did not devise her book as a compendium of background reading<sup>49</sup>.

As Polish poets strove to establish themselves in the new, post-communist reality, anthologists and publishers had to adjust the strategies they used to complete the translation process and ensure their books reach a wide readership. Novelty emerged as a major selling point as they waited for new public narrative to assert itself; however, the central issue of the period remained their position in relation to the bygone era's referential framework. The next section of this Chapter will be devoted to exploring the various trajectories followed by editors, publishers and translators as they attempted to construct new paratextual frameworks within which new Polish poetry could function in the English speaking world.

## 2.3 Central Issue: the Narrative After the Fall

### 2.3.1 Engaging with the Narrative

Spoiling Cannibals' Fun positions itself firmly within the ending narrative, aiming to provide a coda to a story that spanned several decades. This allows Barańczak, the editor, to still make full use of the factual paratext established over that time to ensure a general acceptance of the poetry's value. In addition, he adopts the role of evaluator, appraiser, providing a retrospective judgment with the full benefit of hindsight.

This may seem like a paradox: the anthology purports to be of a socio-political framework which exists only as a cultural imprint on the collective imagination of the target readership, and yet its editorial peritext adopts an outsider's perspective which bestows upon it an air of objectivity and increases its authority. It enables Barańczak to make, in his introduction, seemingly self-contradictory statements allowing a modern, "western" view of poetry's powerlessness to co-exist with a lingering sense of the uniqueness of Poland and its poets.

I am by no means trying to give Polish poetry credit for directly influencing the course of political events in the seventies and eighties. In fact, I am not even talking about "political poetry," whatever this vague term might mean. What I do have in mind is, rather, that Polish poetry of the last two decades offered an astonishingly wide array of individual human responses to the faceless inhumanity of state oppression and a hopeless future – and,

by virtue of this alone, has proved ... that in today's world there are still large areas of human experience that only poetry can explore and put into words. (1)

Barańczak argues that it was culture which provided a buffer between the harsh political reality concerning the general public and any given person's private concerns, and that poetry was the aspect of culture best suited for this function. "I think it might be said that lyric poetry – which by its very nature is the voice of the individual – is the first to react whenever culture faces the task of 'translating' the common experience of society into the language of individual sensation ... No wonder, then, that in Poland the past two decades, and particularly the eighties, witnessed a genuine explosion of lyric poetry writing, which came to dominate other literary genres" (3). Although this is an idea Barańczak formulated much earlier in his monolingual anthologies meant for the Polish market (as described in Chapter 2), it constitutes a novel explanation of the importance of poetry in Poland when it comes to translation anthologies. Poetry is cast as an interpreter, a necessary decoder for a reality which demands answers to impossible questions:

Poland between 1970 and 1989 could rightly be described as a country where poetry was needed. Poetry was read there – and not only read but also smuggled from abroad and printed underground, which could (especially in the first years of martial law) involve harsh consequences ... in Poland, poetry was a means of expression from which much was expected and which, to all intents and purposes, was able to satisfy these expectations. (4)

Barańczak then notes that the emergence and growth of what he calls the “second and third network” (4) meant that more and more poets could publish, and reach audiences, without having to resort to irony in order to bypass the censor. Thus, a poet’s decision to use an ironic voice changed with time from a near-necessity, a self-preservation tactic, to a conscious positioning within one of two opposed streams of literary expression. Barańczak professes that as early as in the first year of martial law, “the apparent variety of poetic approaches ... came down, in fact, to just two basic methods connected with two different concepts of a lyric speaker ... : the perspective of the Single Observer and the perspective of the Romantic Visionary” (5, 6).

The first of these two was an ironist, reflecting on the absurdities and contradictions of reality in emotionally detached, factually accurate verses. The second abandoned irony for the sake of a grander viewpoint and the ability to speak for the masses, frequently referring to the entirety of Poland’s troubled history. This led this second group to lament the inevitability of “eternal Polish fate” (6), where the first would focus on the ludicrousness of current events. Barańczak argues that this dichotomy has remained a defining characteristic of the country’s poetic scene: it has, he notes, “resurfaced time and again and continued to express a significant philosophical and aesthetic divergence” (7). Barańczak has no qualms about expressing his preference for the ironic strand, choosing simplicity of form and speech over Romantic “pathos and loftiness” (7). He thus addresses indirectly doubts concerning the actual quality of socially involved poetry, making use of his position as an insider speaking in a new reality to



formulate a judgment which simply was never an available option for outsiders operating within the narrative of Polish dissident poetry: that is, that some of the morally correct poetry was simply artistically poor, and that poets in opposition to the communist government did not speak in one voice. To the contrary: “In a sense, this paradoxical reconciliation between the extremes of individualism and moralism is, regardless of all the differences in approach and style, a unifying feature of whatever is most valuable in recent Polish poetry” (13).

Dreams of Fires showcases the opposite approach. Its editors stress similarities between the poets, giving the sense that not only was the group they chose to endorse the most important poetic phenomenon of the 70s and 80s, its members shared the same poetics. In their “Introduction”, Malcolm and Scott argue there are parallels to be found at almost all levels: from biographies following comparable paths, through a fondness for “informal, but standard Polish” and “the syntax and vocabulary of spoken, contemporary discourse”, to a penchant towards free verse and “the private lyric utterance, the private monologue, the intimate confession” (12-13). The central motifs are identified as time and its passing, and the conjoined feelings of entrapment and helplessness (14-15).

Anyone familiar with the narrative of Polish dissident poetry, or indeed anyone who has purchased the book after reading the cover copy<sup>50</sup>, is bound to feel very surprised: this list of themes and voices makes no reference to orchestrating a regimes downfall or acting as moral signposts for an entire nation. Malcolm and Scott acknowledge that the poems are not entirely bereft of political

significance, but only insofar as every personal statement can be interpreted as political; an approach closer, in fact, to the perception of the position of contemporary Western poets than to the myth of the Slavic bard. Indeed, they state explicitly that “motifs of rebellion are few and far between in this poetry” (15).

Daniel Weissbort’s “Preface”, meanwhile, falls in line with the book’s marketing peritext, and only occasionally acknowledges that it is mediating an anthology printed in 2004. Even then, Weissbort only does so to assert that what was true then remains valid at the time of writing. He writes “while I am, of course, speaking of the past, I am convinced that it is not too remote for its effects to be discernible” (20). He acknowledges that the period of martial law was a watershed, and that Polish poets now face a new reality; but he tempers this revelation by stating that “nevertheless, the condensed historical experience of the last six or seven decades inevitably informs what poets are writing now as well” (21).

A look at the other anthologies published around the same date would suggest that in most cases, the way in which history “informs” new Polish poets consists of pushing them to reject their traditional duties. However, curiously, even though he acknowledges that the anthology deals with a period roughly overlapping with the time covered by Spoiling Cannibals’ Fun, and although the book is based on a manuscript from the 80s published in 2004 with only minor changes<sup>51</sup>, Weissbort seems to regard it as the illustration of the evolution of Polish poetry. In fact, he contrasts Dreams of Fires with Spoiling Cannibals’ Fun

and implies that somehow, the differences between those two books show that lessons have been learned and aesthetics have changed:

[The Polish poets'] view of the world about them is no longer overtly historical, or coloured by Classical associations. They have undergone an apprenticeship that has immunised them against the tendency to jump to conclusions ... the lens through which poets now look at the world is a domestic one ... The less clearly definable predicament of the 1970s and 1980s (and of today as well) requires a return to a place, so to speak, of tactile apprehension.

(22)

His use of the present tense and terms such as “now” or “today”, encourage the reading of this book as a representation of the current state of Polish poetry. This is compounded by a fragment which the editors also elected to reprint on the back cover: “the admirable, almost preternatural sensitivity of this poetry to what might thwart freedom or threaten human dignity, its exemplary calm and decent detachment in the face of what was and still is a menacing reality” (23). It is unclear in what way Polish reality remains more menacing than that of any other European country.

Weissbort’s remarks are unlikely to be wilful deception, of course. If anything, they attest to the power of the narrative created over the decades by generations of authors. The translator and scholar simply continues to interpret Polish literary production through the same framework that he used over the years, and by extension assumes that Polish reality has not altered enough to render his

paratextual knowledge obsolete, as that might well affect his evaluation of the poetry.

### 2.3.2 Reading the Future

There were, however, purveyors of peritext who acknowledged the narrative's end, and realised it could not fail to be a watershed moment<sup>52</sup>. "It cannot be a matter of pure chance," as Barańczak wrote, "that in Poland the seventies and eighties form an epoch as abundant in earth-shaking political events as it was rich in brilliant poetic achievements" (2). And thus, although Helen Vendler's "Foreword" to Spoiling Cannibals' Fun epitomises the emblematic discourse in which the narrative of Polish dissident poetry had been conducted, referencing most of the recurring motifs of resistance, danger, and brutally enforced silence, it is also suffused with a keen awareness that their relevance is coming to an end.

In the catacombs of apartments under surveillance, in the hasty exchange of Xeroxes, in smuggled packets from prison, in defiantly published underground magazines, many of the poems printed here had their earlier covert existence. ... These poems, then, remain as memorials to an epoch that has ended, and to styles evolved in desperate response to an officially commanded hypocrisy or silence. (xvii)

If not for the remark regarding the "end of an epoch", this fragment could introduce any given anthology of Polish poetry published in English before 1989.

The reference to the ending is, however, a key statement: like Barańczak, Vendler is aware that the narrative of Polish dissident poetry has run its course. Barańczak is primarily concerned with the past, however; the American scholar looks to the future, and expresses her doubts concerning the future of Polish poetry. Vendler's reaction is testament to the extent to which political struggle had defined the country's literature even in the mind of highly informed readers.

Later in the text, she asks: "What will Polish poets do without the Communist system to rebel against? And how many assumptions of the system have invisibly entered the conceptual equipment of the younger, Communist-raised poets?" (Vendler xx), suggesting that Polish poetry is likely to lose direction now that its sworn enemy lies defeated. The implied assumption is that the struggle against the oppressive government was a *sine qua non* condition for all the poetry written in the period. While Vendler acknowledges the existence of a new generation of poets, she seems to worry that they may have been infected by "the system", and thus unable to produce the kind of inflammatory and inspiring verse required by what used to be the only acceptable referential framework. Polish poetry's additional role as a source of moral guidance is also called into question: "And where will new Polish poets locate political good and evil?" (Vendler xx).

Vendler's words of praise for the anthologised poets contain a damning verdict for their younger colleagues: she seems hard-pressed to accept that with the simple dichotomies of right and wrong gone, new Polish authors will be able to keep their work on par with the achievement of the mythical dissident poets.

This is illustrative of the power of the narrative: its obsolescence causes an inability to define the protagonists, because the required categories and terminologies become obsolete, and no new narrative had supplanted the old one by 1991. It should be noted that Vendler may not have been familiar with new Polish poetry at all, since not much of it had been translated and published by 1991.

Just two years later, and writing for the British market, Pirie adopts a different tone to accompany his very different selection of poems: “Surprisingly perhaps to Western readers,” he explains in the “Introduction”, “this anthology contains very little of the ‘poetry of Martial Law’, partly because it has stood the test of time so badly, essentially being cliché-ridden, sentimental political statements” (xvii). He thus acknowledges the transformations which affected Polish society as a whole, but he observes, in line with Polish critics of the period, that the process of cultural change began before the fall of communism – and that part of that process was a growing unease with socially engaged verse. Unlike Vendler, he does not struggle with accepting that the old narrative was no longer serviceable. In fact, he welcomes the change:

The poetry produced during the darkest period following the imposition of Martial Law on 13 December 1981 and published by the enormously influential underground press, operated as a kind of personal and collective therapy, but soon became as mechanical as its official counterpart, bogged down in the obligatory, conventionalised collective statements, with imagery

alluding to Romantic, historical or religious models in an emotive and moralistic rhetoric. ... The 1980s turned out to be a significant watershed, as many poets, perhaps feeling that everything permitted by the prevailing rhetoric had already been expressed, had started to write very private poetry, or in some cases even stopped writing poetry altogether. (xiii)

Pirie does note that the shift to a more private idiom and individualised forms of expression signal the beginning of a period of transformation, and do not constitute a new poetics representative of Polish culture as whole. He believes, however, that an unstable state of flux and metamorphosis is more conducive to great writing than a set of known quantities (see xxv, xxvi); consequently, unlike Vendler, he treats the end of the dominant narrative as a boon.

Although the peritext she provides concerns primarily women, Grol's views on the effects of the changeover echo Pirie's quite closely. In her "Introduction", she also documents a movement towards the personal, as she welcomes the fact that recent poems have shown an increased propensity towards "re-examination of [women's] past and present roles, re-examination of Poland's history, and ways of coping with the ideological disorientation" (xxii). Aside from a rising awareness of gender issues (see also xxvii), Grol stresses the rising importance of themes she believes were hitherto either generally under-represented, or unavailable to women writers in particular. These include rising doubts concerning the value of political activism, a resurgent awareness of the significance of the holocaust, a belief in the enduring nature of words and poetry,

and a critical re-assessment of history. Religion is also an item on the list; she notes although not a new theme per se, poems engaging with spirituality and theology are becoming more and more irreverent, supplementing questions and accusations for prayers and worship (xxix-xxxii). However – and again in agreement with Pirie – Grol cautions against sweeping, conclusive pronouncements about Polish poetry in general, and women's poetry in particular: it is too early, she argues, to predict the shapes that will emerge from the chaos.

A large number of poets write about the ideological bewilderment of recent years. The poets of the late 1980s and 1990s confront a profoundly complex situation. The previous dichotomy of either building or fighting communism is long gone. Gone is the infatuation with the Solidarity movement. Gone is also the facile socio-political rhetoric. Matters are much more complicated, since neither politics nor literature are monolithic. Once the dominance of the communist ideology was abolished, differences surfaced with great force. Poets, like all citizens of Poland, have to find their individual ideological paths. (xxxiii)

The collapse of the old dominant narrative has thus led anthologists to debate whether a new group identity would emerge for Polish poets, and create a sufficiently rich and compelling paratext for new poetry to find a unique place within the body of translated literature. In the next section, I will outline the three main paths followed by those who, rather than wait, took matters in their own hands and attempted to launch the new narrative themselves, defining Polish



poetry in categories ranging from individualism, through western influence, to neo-classical poetics.

### 2.3.3 Formulating New Narratives

The introduction to Altered State opens with the two paragraphs quoted on the back cover, already analysed in Section 3 of this Chapter. Having emphasised the ground-breaking and innovative character of the anthology, Mengham goes on to argue that “Post-communist Poland has willingly abandoned one of the ‘grand narratives’ of European history, and yet its literature is haunted by the sense of evacuation, of being deprived of ideological guarantees worth writing for” (13). A new identity had to be found, and Mengham traces the story of revolutionary changes in Polish poetry back to the mid-eighties, when a new “evolution of sensibility” was sparked by “the publication in July 1986 of the so-called ‘blue’ issue of Literatura na Świecie<sup>53</sup>, devoted entirely to the poets of the New York School” (11). This presentation of contemporary American poetry, Mengham argues, captured Polish imaginations and artistic sensitivities, and defined a couple of discrete new movements by giving rise to groups of imitators, as in the case of O’Harism, and sparking vehement opposition, as exemplified by the New Classicists. “[The New Classicists’] name for the O’Harists was ‘The Barbarians’; the latter were reckoned to be literary vandals, crowding their lines with allusions to a crude new popular culture. Meanwhile, the O’Harists accused their detractors of constructing their poems out of meaningless citations from the great writers of the past” (11). He interprets this partisan division as a symptom signalling the

growth of a healthy culture of writing, with the rivalry between the groups spurring poets on to fully engage with their aesthetics and imaginations. However, his brief historical sketch implies something else: in effect, he states that the strategy Poles selected when faced with the necessity to redefine themselves in a new cultural and political context was to create an identity dependent upon America. To put it even more bluntly: Polish poetry, praised heretofore for the uniqueness that set it apart from Western writing, and admired for the centuries of tradition behind it, chose to model itself on what was, in the year when Altered State was published, an outmoded school of writing. For Anglophone readers still operating with the old grand narrative<sup>54</sup>, or indeed those familiar with the hopeful message of innovation and individualism as expressed by Pirie and Grol, this was very likely an unexpected answer to the question of the fate of Polish poetry in a free market society.

However, the Poles' fascination with O'Hara, Ashbery, and other poets of the same school can be construed as more than mere imitation, and their relationship has grown increasingly complex with the passage of time. Mengham acknowledges this explicitly:

The great paradox in Polish poetry's embrace of the New York School template is that perhaps the biggest change in Polish culture of the 1990s and after is in its relationship with America. In 1986, the examples of O'Hara and Ashbery represented an enlivening, oxygenating alternative to the claustrophobic torpor of official state cultural but in the last fifteen or so years, Poland has been

progressively encroached on by an American, global, postmodern culture whose effects have been extremely mixed. (“Introduction” 12)

While this may not have been his intention, the new narrative Mengham creates for Polish poets replaces one culturally aggressive power, the Soviet Union, with another, the United States. However, this time, the domination is asserted by means of the free market, not brute force, and there is no talk of organised resistance. The individualism and originality heralded by Pirie and Grol are nowhere to be seen<sup>55</sup>.

This is not an opinion shared by Marcin Baran, editor of Carnivorous Boy, Carnivorous Bird. His opening statement announces that “this is an anthology of Polish poetry which is normal and ordinary; that is, if any poetry created in any country and under any circumstances can be viewed as normal and ordinary” (i). It is impossible to overstate how big a break with tradition this opening sentence is. If the poetry is “normal” and “ordinary”, then it cannot be a call to arms, a statement of witness, or a piece of moral guidance; and the Polish environment, no longer exceptional, is simply equal to that of “any country.” Going further, Marcin Baran characterises the functions of Polish poets as defined by the old dominant narrative as little more than an encumbering, heavy load that Poles had been forced to shoulder for centuries, and were only too happy to shed. I will repeat the fragment of his introduction which also appeared on the back cover: “since our lyric beginnings ... poetry has been burdened by readers and poets alike with duties typically delegated to politicians, soldiers, priests or journalists. The

political, social and cultural changes of the last decade allowed young Polish poetry to cast off this burden” (i).

And so, Baran claims, the anthologised poems are “singular, self-contained and exceptional”(i). The narrative he proposes casts Polish poets as individuals with entirely idiosyncratic styles and approaches. Not only does Carnivorous Boy not present poems by members of a tight-knit group of dissidents, it also eschews more modern classification such as “Barbarians” or “Classicists.” “What distinguishes these poets,” Baran explains, “are their individual imaginations and sensitivities as well as the intricacies of their poetic substance” (i).

In fact, Baran then goes on to provide a pastiche of the need to group poets in movements and find overarching themes and preferred poetics for entire generations. He expounds at length on the unusual structure of his book, which divides the twenty-four featured authors into entirely arbitrary and quirkily named sub-groups<sup>56</sup>. This leads to a serious insight, however: the loss of political and moral clout poets may have once enjoyed does not entail their relegation to a secondary, unimportant role, and there is no need for an entire country’s poetic output to be defined by one master narrative. Rather, the freedom from the confines of a role encumbered with social responsibilities enables poets to finally pursue their true purpose and simply be artists “In a constant confusion of mystification and authenticity, distance and directness, representational scepticism and mimetic euphoria, game playing and honesty, the poets presented here perform their informal, singular duties towards language and the human condition” (v).

Neither Baran's paean to individualism nor Mengham's reluctant submission to American influence convinced Jacek Dehnel, the editor of the last anthology of Polish poetry to in the decade. Like Mengham, Dehnel credits Literatura na świecie (and Brulion) with introducing younger generations to the varied cultural phenomena which had not made it to the Polish scene before: his list includes "feminism, cyberpunk, graffiti and techno culture, but also the diction of the New York school of poets" (11). However, he refers to those influences rather dismissively, using the term "novelties from the West" in quotation marks. He decries the flood of foreign influences, offered uncritically to a Polish society hungry for innovation. While this may seem like a development of Mengham's narrative of a new, encroaching, dominating power to be mocked and resisted, Dehnel quickly dispels this impression.

He does acknowledge that this constant stream of fresh concepts, aesthetics, and ideologies encouraged a break with tradition; in fact, he sees it almost as a necessity: "in this situation, cutting itself off from the 'grand old poets' (or 'great dinosaurs' as they are sometimes described) and the New Wave poets was the obvious choice for the younger generation which pointedly mocked the 'bygone era', even though many of its representatives were alive and still publishing" (12). However, in Dehnel's eyes, the prevalence of Barbarism only lasted until the end of the twentieth century, when alternative aesthetics emerged on the Polish poetic scene: they include neo-linguism, which he only mentions in passing, and neo-classicism. Clearly identifying with the latter, he makes the provision that poets belonging to this movement are united principally by their

propensity to “refer to traditional forms”, and they do not consider themselves to be members of an organised, manifesto-led community. In terms of referential frameworks, what Dehnel offers nothing more traditional literary criticism, strongly partisan – and thus with diminished credibility – because of his direct involvement in the scene complete with movements and partisanship.

In conclusion, while attempts have been made to create new paratext for Polish poetry in the English language, neither of them seems to have been strong enough to launch a new public narrative. Originality and individuality are features associated with poets in most western cultures, and cannot serve as distinguishing features for Poles. Acknowledging foreign influence, especially American, is more likely to turn readers away from translated poetry with its connotations of imitation and mediocrity, whether accurate or not. And the toned down neo-classicism of the contributors to Six Polish Poets cannot create a new identity for an entire literature, due to its fragmentary and unrepresentative nature, readily admitted in the book’s peritext. However, in combination, these strategies do successfully reflect the varied and evolving state of contemporary Polish poetry.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

Perhaps the most important findings in this chapter’s concern the power of narrative. At the beginning of the studied period, Poles were anxious for the world to recognise that there were those who among them who still resisted oppression in the darkest years of communist rule. This was not a new image, but with the added sense of urgency stemming from the declaration of martial law, it was

powerful enough to raise the profile of Polish poetry considerably. However, a tendency towards reduction and simplification through generalisation quickly became apparent within the developing narrative. While many Polish poets of the 80s were conscious of the potentially deleterious implications of using their art to directly engage with the political realities of their time, their deliberations on whether an idiom exists that can do justice to poetics, politics, and ethics alike barely filtered through to the consciousness of the English speaking public. The overarching narrative of dissidence shaped the discourse in which Polish poetry could be discussed amongst English speakers, and while it made the transfer of foreign texts easier and more acceptable to readers, and ostensibly more marketable, it also resulted in very different texts being viewed through the same prism.

The narrative ended, and no story of equal strength came to replace it. Pluralism, the abolition of censorship and the advent of the free market brought about a struggle to define a new identity for Poles, and multiple smaller narratives emerged, focusing on outside influences and individualism. The lack of a clearly definable, distinct identity also resulted in varied responses on the anglophone side; some continued to use the old discourse to approach Polish poetry, while others simply lost interest. Once again, anthologies reflected the situation: while their makers tried to formulate alternative narratives, they're insistence on individualism and, in several cases, their willingness to acknowledge foreign influence eroded the unique position of Polish verse.

Without the epitextual support the media and academia gave Polish poetry when the Iron Curtain was in place, anthologies failed to launch the poetics of innovation, the next grand narrative expected with such eagerness both in Poland and abroad in the years immediately following 1989. Throughout the period, anthologies were at their strongest when they engaged with the existing narrative, strengthening it, subtly changing some of its elements, or exploiting it to smuggle through a less than compatible agenda.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Mapping the evolution of English-language anthologies of Polish poetry has proved a complex undertaking. The intricate system of history, manipulation, representation and influence unique to these collections forms more than just a background for the poems they contain. Instead, each anthology combines the poems with peritextual information, and uses them as building blocks in the creation of a new text inscribed within the greater system, a chapter in the grand narrative of Polish poetry as told in the west.

The methodology I formulated in Chapter 1 made possible the study of precisely those aspects of translation anthologies that set them apart from other books, by means of a careful analysis of the books' peritext and an in-depth look at their literary-historical epitext. And indeed, it is only when anthologies are located within this wider context that their creators' decisions can be gauged accurately. To be more precise: the dominant narrative governing exchanges between the source and target cultures has to be identified in order to discover the role the book attempts to play in the process.

Having outlined a blueprint for the study of anthologies of translated poetry, I applied it not only to the corpus of anglophone collections of contemporary Polish verse itself, but also to the wider printed context in which the books operated. Accordingly, my study of the image of Polish poetry as seen from the distinct Polish and Anglophone perspectives has done more than provide a backdrop for the twelve anthologies under scrutiny. Rather, this comparative

analysis constituted a close reading of a text understood more broadly, an epitextual but integral component of the books themselves, which cannot be ignored if a thorough examination is to be performed.

Finally, I proceeded to analyse the books themselves. As stated in the last paragraphs of Chapter Four, I have found that a strong public narrative facilitating the transfer of texts from one culture cannot fail to inform the creation of anthologies of translated poetry. Their study thus offers not only insight into the construction and significance of unique literary artefacts, valuable in itself, but also provides an accurate reflection of how the source or target culture engages with the narrative that defines the dynamics of their intercultural relations – or the lack thereof. Indeed, anthologies of translated literature can be seen as microcosmic representations of both the public narratives and the varied attitudes members of both source and target cultures adopt towards them. I hope that this is sufficient proof for the thesis that anthologies of translated poetry constitute a worthy and distinct field of study, in that they benefit from the power to both reflect and influence the process of translation of entire literary movements or cultures to a larger degree than books by single authors.

Indeed, I firmly believe that my work can be a valuable addition to the field of anthology studies, especially given the scarcity of published material on the subject. In addition, I have also made some contributions the sub-field of Slavic Studies focusing on Polish poetry<sup>57</sup>. In many ways, however, this research can be seen as a pilot project; there are several directions for future research in this

field with the potential to provide more data for analysis and to further test my suggested methodology.

One important area of future enquiry centres on the many ways in which a given anthology's peritext is reflected in the translated texts themselves, and on how the poetics represented in the collection relate to the stated goals of its creators – and the expectations of its readers. A composite study, adding a close reading of the target-language versions of selected poems to the analysis of relevant public narratives, epitext and peritext, would provide a truly comprehensive picture of any anthology.

A further avenue involves extending the scope of the analysis. One way to achieve this involves choosing a longer time period: for example, it can be argued the Polish narrative was first planted in anglophone consciousness in 1827, when John Bowring published his Specimens of the Polish Poets, a volume replete with commentary on Polish poets keeping the nation's spirit alive in the face of partition and occupation. Tracing the evolution of the conceptual framework from its very beginning, through selected volumes of poetry, offers unique opportunities for the understanding of the dominant narrative's origins, and the sources of its power.

Within one time period, the corpus can be expanded to include other types of anthologies. In my study, I have focused on books collecting contemporary poetry. However, a number of other anthologies were published over that period collecting older Polish verse<sup>58</sup>, and the choices of their editors could easily be construed as equally important factors in the shaping of Polish literature's image.

Similarly, Polish poetry featured in a number of thematic and super-national regional anthologies – again, an invaluable source of information on the categories in terms of which editors and publishers perceive the source material and culture. Finally, similar studies with other culture pairings would inevitably unearth different narratives, different power relations, and different levels of public awareness; different epitextual realities, in short, within which anthologies of translated poetry are inscribed. Such an extension, I would argue, is necessary to gain a fuller understanding of the role played by such collections in cultural transfer – and to further develop the best methods for their study.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The field is not entirely neglected: some important work has been done, especially within the framework of the Göttingen project. For some remarks on the lacunae in the study of translation anthologies, see Frank 13 and Di Leo 6-9.

<sup>2</sup> For examples of translation anthology taxonomies, see Essmann, Essmann and Frank, Ferry, and Naaijken.

<sup>3</sup> For a more thorough analysis of authorial paratextual voice, and its effects on a text's reading, see Lise Gauvin's "Frontiers of Language"; also see Anthony Pym on the authorial privileges of translator-anthologizers (Negotiating the Frontier 219-220).

<sup>4</sup> See Bassnett (173-183) and Lefevere (41).

<sup>5</sup> More on the concept of patronage in Lefevere (11-25)

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, David Weissbort's preface in Dreams of Fires (Joachimik, Malcolm and Scott 17-23).

<sup>7</sup> This idea of translations reflecting an anthology's intended function is a hypothesis I formulated while studying the history of Zbigniew Herbert's poetry in English. Close reading of his poems' translations showed traces of conscious and unconscious decisions made by translators during the translation process that encouraged a political reading of the text matching the intended function of the publication, as defined by, for example, Al Alvarez, who tried to prove to genteel English poets that it was possible to write good political poetry (Herbert, Miłosz and Scott 9-15), or Czesław Miłosz, who sought to explain what he saw as

Poland's special position on the literary map by its history of oppression and poetry's role in the resistance movement (Miłosz ix-xv, 121).

<sup>8</sup> I use the term “narrative” in accordance with Mona Baker's definition, as defined in her monograph, Translation and Conflict; I discuss the concept in greater detail later in this section.

<sup>9</sup> Heaney referred to Herbert's verse on a number of occasions; a good example of his approach can be found in his essay *Atlas of Civilisation* (Heaney 63-65).

<sup>10</sup> For a more thorough description and analysis of the historical and political events accompanying the introduction of Martial Law in Poland, see, for example, Paczkowski et al.

<sup>11</sup> Later in this chapter, I will briefly outline the events in 1976, which had an important influence on a whole generation of poets four years before Martial Law, and prepared the ground for literary reactions to political troubles.

<sup>12</sup> This dearth of general anthologies was seen by some as the result of a conscious “divide and rule” policy by the powers that be. In his introduction to a 2002 collection which I will discuss at greater length later in this chapter, Krzysztof Karasek writes: “No wonder that you could count anthologies of Polish poetry published in the last few decades on the fingers of one hand; under totalitarian rule, only the system had the right to create such all-encompassing depictions. On the other hand, dozens of marginal, unnecessary anthologies were published every year (...) Their only function was to simulate a rich literary life,

deprived, as if by accident, of a centre, a core, built entirely of margins and peripheries.” (Współcześni poeci polscy, Karasek, 6)

<sup>13</sup> “The unrepresented world”; a book considered by many critics (including, manifestly, Bożena Tokarz) to be one of the few volumes that can be construed as New Wave artistic manifestoes.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the precise reach of *Nowa Fala* and various interpretations thereof, see, for example, Nyczek’s “Introduction” to Humps & Wings, or Stabro’s Poezja i Historia 387-428.

<sup>15</sup> See Czapliński et. al., 345, 405

<sup>16</sup> For a list of excerpts from pertinent journal and newspaper articles, see Czapliński et al., 315-316

<sup>17</sup> All the quotations listed by Orska come from texts published in 2000.

<sup>18</sup> For more on the decentralisation of Polish poetry in the 90's and its consequences, see Sławiński, 14-16 and Czapliński et al., 410-411.

<sup>19</sup> The inadequacy of the breakthrough as a concept for the analysis of literature created in 1989 and beyond is discussed in more detail in Orska, 9-11 and Pietrzak, 19-20.

<sup>20</sup> For several more excerpts from enthusiastic press reviews of Brulion in its post-1989 incarnation, see Klejnocki and Sosnowski, 6-10 and Czapliński et al., 383, 456;

<sup>21</sup> For examples of texts criticising the Brulion generation’s marketing techniques, see Bratkowski, Czech, Kornhauser, and Orlński.

<sup>22</sup> For example, Miłosz and Szymborska, the two Polish Nobel prize winners, both made their debuts before that date, and thus are not included in the book.

<sup>23</sup> Their collection was first published in 2000, with a revised edition printed in 2004; it is from the introduction to this new and updated version that I will be quoting.

<sup>24</sup> Note that the English translation of the title is unfortunately not enough to identify the poem in questions, as there are more than a few Polish poems whose title could be rendered as “Night Prayer”.

<sup>25</sup> For more on the situation immediately preceding the declaration of Martial Law, including insights on the relative independence of the official Writer’s Union of the time and the resulting temporary overlap between the first and second circulation, see “Letter from Poland” (Sawyer A.7)

<sup>26</sup> The three articles cited are from the early 80s; for representative examples of poets called upon to provide political commentary closer to the end of the decade, see Neuharth (1) and Kenney (5).

<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that the Observer is the Guardian’s sister paper, and, in most cases, shares the same outlook.

<sup>28</sup> For a similar statement about Szymborska, see “Reclusive Polish Poet”, Murphy 1.

<sup>29</sup> For an example of an academic paper commenting on Polish poetry used as a footnote to American crises, see “Acknowledged Legislators,” Cavanagh 17.



<sup>30</sup> A total of five books were published in the 1980s, clustered at the beginning and the end of the decade: the first was Witness Out of Silence: Polish Poets Fighting for Freedom, a slim volume which appeared in 1980 as a reaction to the events of 1976 and predicting the dire years of martial law. Humps & Wings: Polish Poetry Since '68 and Postwar Polish Poetry: New, Expanded Edition came next, both printed in the United States, in 1982 and 1983 respectively. The remaining two volumes were published by imprints based in the United Kingdom: 1988 saw the publication of Ariadne's Thread: Polish Women Poets, and in 1989, Bloodaxe made available The Burning Forest: Modern Polish Poetry, compiled by the renowned translator, poet and critic Adam Czerniawski.

<sup>31</sup> The collection in question is The New Polish Poetry, published in 1978.

<sup>32</sup> There is one more frequent selection criterion: translatability. I discuss it later in the section, when I analyse the strategies used to address the status of the texts as translations.

<sup>33</sup> Syllabotonic verse (featuring regularly alternating patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables) was a staple in several Slavic literatures, most prominently in Russian verse. It became popular in Polish poetry in the late eighteenth century, although examples have been found as early as the sixteenth century. For more on its development in Poland, see Gasparov, Smith & Holford-Stevens (244-247).

<sup>34</sup> It might be worth noting that this is, in fact, a very popular myth amongst publishers: a search for "Ariadne's Thread" on the website of the online

bookseller, Amazon, reveals 1075 books with those words in their titles (“Amazon: Ariadne’s Thread: Books”).

<sup>35</sup> These include two collections published in the UK (Young Poets of a New Poland, 1993 and Altered State: the New Polish Poetry, 2003) and two American publications (Ambers Aglows: Contemporary Polish Women’s Poetry, 1996, and Carnivorous Boy, Carnivorous Bird: Poetry from Poland, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> The poets are Boruń, Czekanowicz and Sommer; the shared poem is the latter’s “Medicine”.

<sup>37</sup> I put the term between quotation Marks because Dehnel himself is not happy with this designation, noting its ambiguity. He prefers the longer, and more descriptive “poets who refer to traditional forms” (13).

<sup>38</sup> This feature is missing from Young Poets of a New Poland.

<sup>39</sup> I will discuss them in greater detail later in this chapter, when analysing the period’s defining issue, i.e. reacting to this very narrative.

<sup>40</sup> See Musiał’s “Wielki impresariat...” for an example of a vitriolic attack on writers associated with Brulion.

<sup>41</sup> Maj’s poems were featured both in The Burning Forest and Spoiling Cannibals’ Fun.

<sup>42</sup> It should be noted that ten years separate the publication of the two books, and Mengham, Pióro and Szymor thus enjoy the benefit of a more removed vantage point. Nevertheless, there is some overlap in the material covered: the books share five poets (Ekier, Machej, Sendeki, Sosnowski and Świetlicki), and

even several poems. I would contend these similarities are further proof of the similarities between their respective sets of selection criteria.

<sup>43</sup> These paratextual elements, in line with the 80s narrative of the dissident poet, strongly imply that the book is an anthology of dissident verse; I discuss them in more detail later in this Chapter, in the section devoted to marketing the books.

<sup>44</sup> It is perhaps worth pointing out that Vendler herself is a literary scholar, and had nothing to do with the process of translation itself. Barańczak and Cavangh, the translator team who made the book possible, do not discuss their craft anywhere in the book.

<sup>45</sup> 2004 is a full fifteen years after the round table and the first democratic elections, and thirteen after Barańczak's book provided English speaking readers with a sense of closure.

<sup>46</sup> See for example Baran's introduction to Carnivorous Boy Carnivorous Bird.

<sup>47</sup> While this discrepancy is addressed in the peritext within the book, this is the description the reader will see first.

<sup>48</sup> There is one minor indication that not all parties shared the enthusiasm for a fresh start. The main title of Carnivorous Boy Carnivorous Bird is repeated on the back side of its cover, but the subtitle is changed somewhat from the front: it reads "Bilingual Anthology of Contemporary Polish poetry." This re-ordering of information brings to the fore the information that the collection contains the Polish originals as well as the English translations, and specifies the period of their

writing as the present day. The front cover references the very general “Poetry from Poland” – it is a more succinct phrase, but one could perhaps hazard a guess that the publisher thought it more marketable: general poetry from Poland would arguably be a more popular commodity, supported by the strength of the previous era’s factual paratext, than the unknown quantity of contemporary Polish verse.

<sup>49</sup> Since the book was published in the same year Szymborska was awarded the prestigious prize, it could be conjectured that Grol wrote her introduction beforehand and thus could have no knowledge of this much-publicised event.

<sup>50</sup> See section 3 of this chapter.

<sup>51</sup> See interview with David Malcom.

<sup>52</sup> As shown in Chapter 2, Section 3, this was also the most common approach amongst Polish critics and literary scholars.

<sup>53</sup> An influential state-published journal featuring translated literature from around the world.

<sup>54</sup> The image of dissident Polish poets was still present in the popular media in 2003 (and later), as shown in the last sections of Chapter 3.

<sup>55</sup> It should be noted that for all his optimism, Pirie did acknowledge US influence on Polish poets. “American poetry of the 1950s and 1960s ... has been a significant influence on the new generation. The academics and writers, previously in opposition or emigration ... have become a new establishment, and lose no opportunity to give their opinion on the current state of literature.” (“Introduction” xxv)

<sup>56</sup> They are: metaphysical landscape painters (homeliness and alienation), verbal test pilots (testing present day language), songsters of confession (experiences in their lives), anarchists of pain (premonitions of misfortune), sensual mystics (religious inspirations), crystalline lyric poets (presenting the world in astonishing clarity), humorists of despair (poking fun at cultural systems), gnostic essentialists (a physical, heavenly and metaphoric world).

<sup>57</sup> Both relevant sections, i.e. Chapters Two and Three, represent an addition to the existing body of knowledge about Polish poetry in English: Chapter Two, due to a reliance on Polish source materials heretofore unavailable in English, and Chapter Three, based on a bibliography of academic and popular sources which, to the best of my knowledge, had not been compiled before.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Mikoś (all) or Carpenter (Monumenta Polonica).

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